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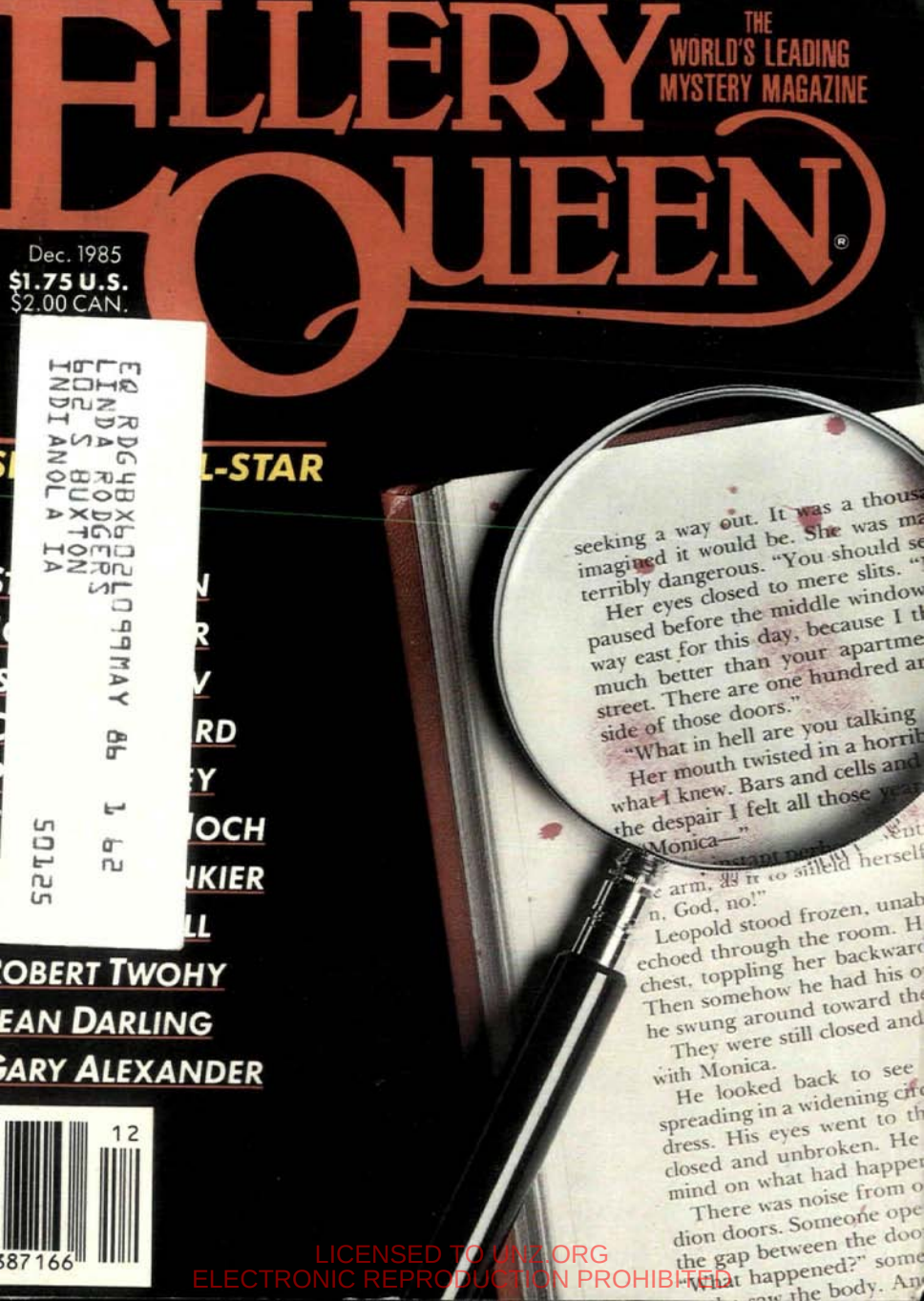
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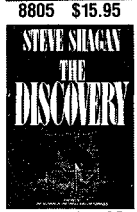

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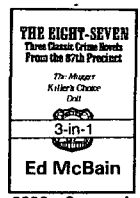

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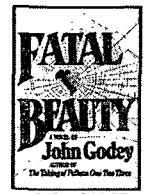

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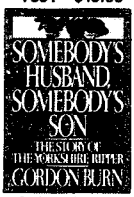

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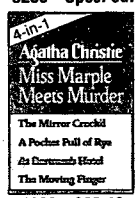

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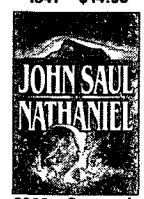

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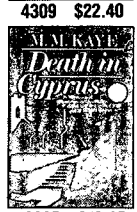

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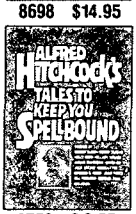

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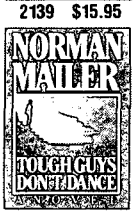

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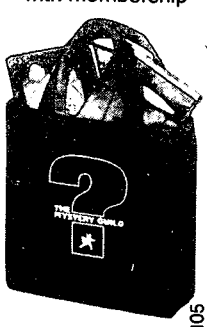

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a *NEW* short story by

STANLEY ELLIN

"Disappearances?" said Fraser Smith (Smith's Market—Quality Meats and Groceries). "Of what?"

"People," said Police Chief Ralph Gibbs. "Folks heading up the road towards Huxtable Falls here but never made it. Never made it anywhere, far as some of these records in front of me shows. First was summertime three years ago. Two high-school boys from Antico town went bicycling off to get a look at Canada. Never heard of again."

"Stale news, Ralph," remarked Benjamin Starr (Starr's Cars—Sales and Service). "Them Antico people made a considerable fuss about it at the time."

"Fact," said Ralph Gibbs.

Facts: Stanley Ellin's latest novel, Very Old Money *(Arbor House), is a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and has been picked up for the movies by Twentieth Century-Fox. "The Specialty of the House," his first published fiction (May 1948 EQMM), has been voted the most memorable mystery story of all time. He received the Grand Prix de Litterature Policière for his novel,* Mirror Mirror on the Wall, *described by Joe Gores as "such a dazzlingly audacious book that the mystery field (although it probably doesn't realize this yet) has been forever altered by it."* The New Yorker *said, "His characters spring to attention every time he hits a typewriter key." We say we will never get over our good fortune that Mr. Ellin sent "The Specialty of the House" to EQMM those many years ago and that he has continued to send us each new treasure he has written since . . .*

"Q"

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UNACCEPTABLE PROCEDURES

by STANLEY ELLIN

The meeting, surprisingly summoned on only one day's notice, was held in the Chief Selectman's office at the far end of the upstairs corridor of the town hall. Not much of an office for size and thriftily furnished with essentials acquired cheaply over the past century, it still provided sufficient accommodation for the Board of Selectmen around the well worn oak table there.

Of course, since the room was at the rear of the building, it did offer to anyone with an eye for that sort of thing the view of a vast rolling woodland extending to the faraway horizon. A spectacular view especially this mid-autumn time of year, what with those hills showing as much scarlet and gold as evergreen. And even more so at this hour of day, when the star-spangled darkness already shadowing Maine to the east could almost perceptibly be seen flowing westward toward Vermont to dim the flaming sunset there.

However, the gathering around the table took no notice of this familiar scene: it was the ancient Naval Observatory clock ticking away on the wall between the windows that engaged its interest. Five selectmen, all greyhaired, thin-lipped men of substance. Chief Selectman Samuel Sprague, president of the Merchants Bank. Jacob Sprague, younger brother to Samuel and the bank's treasurer. Abner Perkins, real-estate sales, rentals, and property maintenance. Benjamin Starr, Starr's Cars—Sales and Service. Fraser Smith, Smith's Market—Quality Meats and Groceries. All five of them done up neatly in jacket and necktie as was the tradition at selectmen's meetings, they sat silently with eyes fixed on the clock. The meeting had been called for six. The clock now plainly marked three minutes past the hour.

It was Fraser Smith who broke the silence. He cleared his throat and addressed Chief Selectman Samuel Sprague. "You said special meeting, Sam. Special how? Not getting started on time?"

"Seems so," admitted Samuel Sprague. "But what we're waiting for is our police chief. Told me last night to get us all together so we could meet with him in strict private. Make it for when the

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building's cleared out, said he, so there wouldn't be any ears at the door."

Benjamin Starr raised an eyebrow. "Considering that Chief Ralph Gibbs has the biggest and busiest ears in town—"

"And worse than ever these last few months," put in Abner Perkins. "Matter of fact, he's getting downright peculiar. Could be that what we just gab about now and then—I mean, after going on thirty years maybe he's been on the job a mite too long—well, could be time we do something about it."

"He works cheap," Samuel Sprague pointed out.

"Can't much call it work," said Abner Perkins, "in any town peaceable as this."

"Except," said Benjamin Starr, "for them high-school kids using my car lot nights for rumpus-raising and playing them stereo machines to all hours. I tell Ralph about it, and what's he say? He says to me, 'Well, they're young and full of oats the way we once was. We grew out of it and so will they.' That's our police chief talking, mind you."

"Talking about what?" said a voice from the doorway, and the selectmen all swiveled heads to coldly regard their police chief. Unlike the company he was joining, Ralph Gibbs was exceedingly well fleshed, his double chin draped over his shirt collar, his belly overlapping his belt. His uniform—the town's choice of grey with brown piping—needed pressing; when he removed his cap the white hairs fringing his shining pate indicated that he had been a long time away from any barber chair. To add to this study in dishevelment he was clutching a large, dingy plastic bag bulging with papers and cardboard folders. On the bag was inscribed in red lettering *Smith's Market—Quality Meats and Groceries.* He smiled at the company. "And just what was your police chief talking about?"

"More to the point," said Samuel Sprague, "you asked for this meeting, and seems like you're the one late to it."

"Few minutes at most," said Ralph Gibbs. "Had to get a man to take over my desk. Ain't easy when the department's this shorthanded."

"Shorthanded?" snorted Benjamin Starr. "With four men on days—"

"That includes me," said Ralph Gibbs, seating himself at the foot of the table with the plastic bag on what there was of his lap.

"Including you," said Benjamin Starr. "For this size town to have as much as four paid police for days and two for nights—"

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Samuel Sprague rapped his knuckles on the table. "Ben, pipe down. Ralph told me this business we're here for is real important, so let's get to it. I therefore call to order this confidential meeting—"

"Meeting in executive session," corrected Jacob Sprague.

"—meeting in executive session—meaning strictly confidential—of this Board of Selectmen of the township of Huxtable Falls. Go on, Ralph, speak your piece."

"Thank you kindly, Sam," said Ralph Gibbs. He spilled the contents of the shopping bag on the table and stacked them into an untidy heap.

"What's all that?" asked Abner Perkins.

"Four months of police work, Abner," said Ralph Gibbs. "Real fine big-city police work, if I do say so myself." He sat back and eased open the remaining closed button of his jacket. "Well then, gentlemen, all this starts with some disappearances in these parts."

"Disappearances?" said Fraser Smith. "Of what?"

"People, Fraser. Folks heading up the road towards Huxtable Falls here but never made it. Never made it anywhere, far as some of these records in front of me shows. First was summertime three years ago. Two high-school boys from Antico town went bicycling off to get a look at Canada. Never heard of again."

"Stale news, Ralph," remarked Benjamin Starr. "Them Antico people made a considerable fuss about it at the time."

"Fact," said Ralph Gibbs. "Then two years ago, also summertime, there was that young Greendale couple, fellow and girl, headed Canada way on their motorbike, and, far as anyone yet knows, rode right off into limbo, so to speak."

"Not married neither," said Fraser Smith. "So I heard."

"Not married neither," agreed Ralph Gibbs. "Just young, healthy, and sinful. And now among the missing. Then last summer there was that young married couple set off from Inchester, backpacking up to the north woods, and that was the last seen of them. Nobody outside of Inchester recollects getting even a look at them going by. And the girl was mighty pretty, judging from her picture. Not the kind to be overlooked that easy."

"Maybe not," said Fraser Smith. "Saw that picture on the TV news when she was first suspected missing. Real handsome leggy girl all right."

"But out of Inchester," protested Benjamin Starr. "And those others were out of Antico and Greendale. So except for those towns

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being in the same county as us, I don't see what this has to do with Huxtable Falls."

"Which," said Ralph Gibbs, "was my line of thought, too, up to last Fourth of July. Tourist party stopped by headquarters that day to ask directions. So I took out the old state map to point them right, and whilst at it my eye was caught by something there."

"Do tell," said Benjamin Starr drily.

"Like, for instance, all three of them towns is southward of us, oh, maybe seven, eight miles away. Now squint your eyes and picture it. Antico's right there on the main highway and Inchester and Greendale ain't that far away on each side of it on them county blacktops. Antico folks going north just use the highway right through here. Those from Inchester and Greendale, well, their blacktops join up with the highway from each side at Piney Junction a mile south of our town limits."

"Real keen police work, Ralph," said Fraser Smith. "So you know the county map, do you?"

"Fact, Fraser. But the worrisome part is that every one of them young folks that disappeared had to pass right through town here to wherever they was headed. And for not one single soul in Huxtable Falls to ever get a glimpse of them? Makes you wonder if any of them got this far at all, don't it?"

"You mean," said Samuel Sprague, "if anything did happen to them, you're pinning it down to around the Junction?"

"Closer than that, Sam. Just take notice that right inside our town limits near the Junction is the old Samson estate. Right?"

"Wrong," put in Abner Perkins. "That property hasn't rightly been the Samson estate for quite a spell now."

"Good point, Abner," said Ralph Gibbs. "Since you got them outsiders to take a five-year lease on it—and four years are already used up—maybe we should call it the Doctor Karl Jodl estate. Especially with all that work the Doctor's paying you to fix it up. Looks sure he'll pick up that option to buy next year, don't it?"

"My business," said Abner Perkins. "And the Doctor's. Not yours. And if you—"

"Hush up, Abner," said Samuel Sprague. He aimed his jaw at Ralph Gibbs. "What about Doctor Karl Jodl, Ralph? Seems to be a nice fellow, far as anyone knows. A little stand-offish maybe, but respectable, him and that whole crew he moved in with him on the estate."

"Seems to be," agreed Ralph Gibbs. "Anyhow, what it comes to is

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sort of a problem that's too much for me. So before I work out the bottom line I'd like the opinion of you folks here. And before you provide that opinion just listen close."

"About Doctor Jodl?" said Samuel Sprague.

"That's right, Sam. Like, to start with, the fact that him and his crew settled four years ago for a five-year lease on the Samson estate, lease money to apply to purchase price if and when there was a sale. True, Abner? You made the deal, so you'd know."

"It was a fair deal," said Abner Perkins shortly.

"Kind of a happy surprise, too, wasn't it? That big old mansion and them outbuildings rotting away, twenty acres of ground overgrown, that swamp in back oozing right up to the buildings. Didn't look like you'd ever get rid of that property. Then all of a sudden—"

"It was a fair deal all around," Abner Perkins said.

"—and all of a sudden along comes this Mr. Thomas from the Doctor—"

"Tomas," said Abner Perkins. "Toe-mass. Tomas."

"Beg pardon, Abner. Mr. Toe-mass. Along he comes, the Doctor's check in hand, to sign the papers, and next thing you look to have struck gold in that property. I mean, what with all that contract work to bring it back to shape, buildings and grounds. Swamp's all drained now except for its far end, ain't it? Place does look pretty, all right."

"Honest work, every inch," said Abner Perkins. "Buildings and grounds."

"That's your style, Abner, no denying it. Then one night before work's hardly got started, along comes this fleet of hired haulage vans, all doing business out of California, and quite a lineup of fancy cars with California plates, and next morning the Doctor and his people are settled in snug as can be. Maybe twenty of them by my count."

"Twenty?" said Samuel Sprague.

"Well, figuring in the Doctor and his lady—that Madam Solange—and what looks to be assistant doctors and house help and security men, somewhat around twenty." Ralph Gibbs nodded toward Fraser Smith. "Seems they do all their marketing at Fraser's place, too. His books ought to show enough to back that figure up."

"You looking to be my bookkeeper now, Ralph?" said Fraser Smith.

"Not likely, Fraser. Anyhow, gentlemen, there we have a whole new community, so to speak, hitched onto Huxtable Falls. Standoffish and highly prosperous. And not far from the Junction, where

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it seems young healthy folks have a way of disappearing now and then."

"And you are soured on the Doctor for living there?" asked Abner Perkins coldly.

"You're rushing me out of turn, Abner," said Ralph Gibbs. "I was just getting around to asking how much anybody here ever sees of them folks close up. Aside from that Mr. Tomas who looks to be sort of manager of the works, and shows up all sunshine and smiles around town. Anybody here ever get a real close look at the Doctor and that Madam Solange?"

"Well," said Samuel Sprague. "I've seen them waiting in that limo in town square a couple of times. What's more, I give them a nod, they give me a nod. Nothing mysterious about it."

"Seen them, too," said Fraser Smith. "Nice-looking couple. High-toned. Old-fashioned mannerly. They just don't want their feet stepped on by busybodies, that's my guess."

"And mine," said Benjamin Starr. "They're in the limo now and then when it gasses up. Never argue price for repairs or for any of them new cars they order. And those cars are always top dollar. And they pay all bills on the dot. Stand-offish? Why not? Maybe they've got more important business in mind than some."

"You mean like medical business, Ben?" asked Ralph Gibbs.

"That's what I mean."

"Ralph," said Samuel Sprague impatiently, "you know as well as us it's medical business. That Mr. Tomas never made any secret of it. Doctor Jodl's a heart man, top rank. Doing some big research for the government. With a fat grant from Washington, D.C. to pay for it. Can't say I truckle to public money going that direction, but there's nothing unlawful about it, is there?"

"Well, maybe just a mite, Sam. Like, for instance, Doctor Karl Jodl is not on any government grant at all. And he is not a heart man, any rank."

The selectmen gaped. Finally Samuel Sprague said, "Not doing heart research? No grant?"

"Neither," said Ralph Gibbs.

"But from what I heard—"

"Same as we all heard, Sam, from that Mr. Tomas. However"—Ralph Gibbs dug into the pile of papers on the table and came up with a well stuffed folder. He slid it across the table to Samuel Sprague—"however, what you've got there, Sam, is some letters

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between me and the government people in Washington. And the state people in California. Read 'em close. Take your time about it."

The selectmen kept eyes on Samuel Sprague as he took his time about it, his brow furrowing. Then he looked up at them. "No grant," he said. "No heart man. Leastways, that's what I make of it." He looked at Ralph Gibbs. "What I can't make of it is this medical stuff. This hemodynamics talk. What's it mean?"

"Blood," said Ralph Gibbs.

"Come again?"

"Blood, Sam. That red stuff that leaks out when you cut yourself shaving." Ralph Gibbs tapped the stack of papers before him. "It's all here. Seems that's where the Doctor's an expert. On the Coast he had those two outfits: the Jodl Institute for Hemodynamic Research and the Jodl Clinic for Rejuvenation, both tied tight together. And you saw those figures there for his last ten years' profits, didn't you? Money coming in by the barrel. All that part is from the private investigation agency I hired out there. Private but reliable."

"Hired?" said Abner Perkins. "Out of the police budget?"

"Worth it, Abner. Especially if Sam here tells you about that letter from the state of California itself saying why that institute and that clinic were all of a sudden shut up."

"Well, Sam?" said Abner Perkins.

"It's down here in black and white, Abner. Just two words is all. 'Unacceptable procedures.' "

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," said Ralph Gibbs, "that a lot of beat-up old millionaires around the world were getting themselves rejuvenated some way the state of California didn't truckle to."

"Without saying why it didn't, more than this?"

"Nary a hint, Abner. When I pushed them on it all I could get was goodbye and good luck."

"And goodbye's the right word, Ralph," said Abner Perkins. "All right, so the Doctor's living on his own money, not any government handout. All the better. And that institute and clinic could have bent some California rules, but what about it? He didn't open them up again here, did he? You don't mind me saying it, Ralph, but you have gone so far off the track that you want to lay everybody missing from the county on that man just because he's new to these parts."

"Didn't want to, Abner. Just couldn't help it, once I got to the Europe part of it."

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"Now it's Europe?" Abner Perkins rose abruptly. "Look, I have got a hot supper waiting for me at seven, and I don't—"

"Abner," said Samuel Sprague, "hush up and sit down." He addressed Ralph Gibbs. "And don't you play games, Ralph. What's Europe got to do with this?"

"Ever hear of Interpol, Sam?"

"I might have. Some kind of international police, right?"

"Well, more like an information place to help police in one country get lined up with those elsewhere. Help make connections, so to speak."

"And how come Huxtable Falls needs any such connections?"

"Well," said Ralph Gibbs, "according to these California documents, Doctor Karl Jodl landed there from Switzerland where he used to have another such institute and clinic. And the Switzerland government people told me they was just shut up tight one day. Want to guess why?"

"Unacceptable procedures?" said Samuel Sprague.

"You get the cigar, Sam. So then I got in touch with Interpol and had them look up Doctor Jodl. Didn't get much from them really, but did get friendly with one of their men over the phone."

"Our headquarters phone?" said Benjamin Starr. "To Europe?"

"We'll get to that later, Ben. Right now the point is that this fellow steered me to a private agency in Switzerland that would look real close into people's private business, for a price. And yes, Ben, before you come out with it, it cost money signing up that outfit. But, as duly noted before, it was worth every cent."

"Worth it?" said Fraser Smith. "Lord almighty, you must have run right through your whole department budget already."

"Pretty near, Fraser. And even gone into my own pocket. But here and now"—Ralph Gibbs detached several folders from the stack—"is what you could call the history of Doctor Karl Jodl in Europe from way back when. Copies of everything that agency sent, along with old photos from magazines and newspapers there. There's a set for each of you gents so as not to waste time." He passed the folders around the table, then sat back comfortably in his chair. "Just say the word when you're ready."

For fifteen minutes by the Naval Observatory clock there was intense concentration around the table on the contents of the folders. Samuel Sprague finally closed his folder very gently. He waited until the laggards had finished their reading and a frowning ex-

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amination of the photographs. All faces around the table, excluding the police chief's, reflected bewilderment.

"Well?" said Ralph Gibbs.

"There's something crazy here, Ralph," said Samuel Sprague.

"My thought, too, Sam, when I plowed through that mess first time around."

"It was?"

"Had to be. After all, here was all that Europe information put together. The whole works. Birth certificate from Austria, schooling, medical training, marriage, that rejuvenation clinic up in the mountains there, then Italy right across the border and another clinic, then Switzerland and still another, and those dates just didn't make sense. And those photos even less. Had to be at least three different people here, I told myself, not one Doctor Karl Jodl. Except, however you add it up, it comes out only one."

"Lord almighty, Ralph," said Fraser Smith, "it can't be. It makes that man a hundred years old. And that woman—that Madam Solange—near as much. I've seen them this close. I'd figure him to be maybe forty, if that much. And she don't go much over thirty by any reckoning."

"That's how it looks, Fraser, not how it is. The dates on these papers and pictures are all truthful. Allowing for the old-fashioned clothes and hairdos, can you tell me that those aren't photos of Doctor Karl Jodl and his wife and nobody else? Fact is, she's the clincher. Maybe the original Karl Jodl would have had a son and grandson and great-grandson who was every one in turn his spitting image and for some reason wanted to make out they themselves was all the original when they grew up. But we know each of them did not marry women who one and all just happened to be the spitting image of Mrs. Doctor Karl Jodl. No way could that happen. So that leaves just one answer that makes sense. And it's all down in those papers, like it or not."

"The clinics," said Samuel Sprague heavily. "Hemodynamics. Total transfusion."

"Total's the payoff word, Sam," said Ralph Gibbs. "Take a few quarts of fresh young blood, add a dab of some secret chemicals, pump out all the old stuff, pump in all new, and look what you've got. Why, it could be the biggest thing any doctor ever come up with—except it might be a little too total for some people's good. Specially some healthy young folks who wouldn't be offered any vote in the matter, would they?"

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"Not much," said Samuel Sprague. "But I still can't get it into my head that a man like that—"

"Right," Abner Perkins cut in. "Because this whole thing is wild-eyed speculation, that's all. That man never set up any such clinic here, did he? There's no reason in the world to think what you all look like you're thinking."

"Just one, Abner," said Ralph Gibbs. "He and his wife do look mighty spry for their age. And there's something more to take into account. Kind of touching, too, in a way."

"Touching?" said Samuel Sprague. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means I put in a stretch a few times this summer up in that brush in Samson's Hill with the binoculars. Couldn't see inside the main house that way, but could get a good look at the grounds roundabout."

"Why?" said Samuel Sprague. "Trying to find out if any customers in Rolls-Royces were sneaking in to get rejuvenated?"

"You are sharp, Sam, that I'll give you. That's why, all right. And never did see any such customers. What I did see was the Doctor and his lady doing a slow ramble through those fancy gardens up to what's left of the old swamp. Just walking along slow and easy, talking to each other and mostly holding hands. Sometimes they'd set themselves down on one of them ironwork benches and have a kissing party. Those are high-powered binoculars all right. And one thing came clear through them. I figure that man's a little crazy more ways than one, but one way I know for sure. He is crazy in love with that woman. Easy to see why, too, with her looks and style. And that's what it's all about. Whatever it takes, he is going to keep her just the way she is for as long as he can. And himself right there along with her."

"Whatever it takes," said Samuel Sprague.

"Afraid so, Sam. That's the catch."

"Only if you buy all this foolishness," said Abner Perkins.

"Abner," said Samuel Sprague, "you know that what we've got here is no foolishness, so quit trying to make it sound that way." He turned to Ralph Gibbs. "Now what? You aim to get out a warrant against the Doctor?"

"Lord almighty," said Fraser Smith.

"But there's no bodies," said Benjamin Starr. "Only some people missing."

"Just the same, Ben," said Ralph Gibbs, "there's enough here to

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make quite a case. And whether Doctor Karl Jodl wins it or loses it, he's a marked man afterwards. How do you think the newspapers and TV will handle this right across the country? Still and all—"

"Yes?" said Samuel Sprague.

"Still and all, Sam, I can see two directions to move. This thing's too big for me anyhow. Best to go down to Concord and lay it all out for the state people. Let them take over. After all, it covers more than Huxtable Falls, don't it? There's three other towns nearby with what you might call a vested interest in it."

Samuel Sprague considered this. "That's one direction, Ralph. What's the other?"

"Well now, Sam, one thing is pretty sure. We cut loose on Doctor Karl Jodl and company, they'll take off from these parts quick as they can. Fact. So putting myself in your place—"

"My place?"

"Yours and Jacob's, what with you two owning our good old Merchants Bank. I was thinking of you two waving goodbye to the biggest customer the bank's got. A six-figure depositor no less."

"Who told you about that?" demanded Samuel Sprague.

"Don't matter who, Sam. What matters is it's the truth. As for Abner there and his real-estate business, well, he stands to have that white elephant Samson estate dumped right back in his hands. No closing the sale for it, no fat contract afterwards to keep the place in shape. Same for Ben there and his car business. No more Doctor Jodl for luxury buys, no more high-price repairs on that whole fleet the Doctor's lined up for his kind services. And I guess I don't have to remind Fraser that the Doctor and his crowd have to be the market's number-one customers for sure. I mean, what with those loads of fancy meat and trimmings being trucked out there every few days. Am I making myself clear?"

"Some," said Samuel Sprague. "Not all. What's on your mind, Ralph?"

"Well now, what's on my mind is that all this started because some folks turned up missing from towns roundabout. But let's look at it this way. That's not my business, is it? They want the answers I got, let them go hunt them up like I did. Get the point now, Sam?"

"Except for what you left out. What makes you so sure that next summertime, let's say, a couple of our own young folks won't turn up missing from right here in Huxtable Falls?"

"Fair question, Sam. But I guarantee nobody as smart as Doctor Karl Jodl looks to make waves right here in home port. No chance

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of that. That's how it's been since he settled down here; that's how it'll keep on."

"All the same, Ralph—"

"So I could just tuck all these papers here back in this shopping bag and lock it up nice and tight in my house. Which, for that matter, is where it's been kept all along. Strictly my own private business so far. Nobody else's."

"Even so, Ralph," said Abner Perkins, "if you'd just heave all that stuff in the fire—"

"No, don't see it quite that way, Abner," said Ralph Gibbs. "And there's still some items on the agenda."

"Such as?" said Samuel Sprague.

"Well, for one thing, seems there's been talk amongst you gentlemen that after me holding down my desk for nigh thirty years, it's time to put the old horse out to pasture. Fact is, I like my job. It'll do my morale a lot of good to know I'm set in it until I say otherwise."

"What else?" said Samuel Sprague.

"Matter of repayment, Sam. That Europe agency cost me cash out of my pocket. Can't see making repayment a town budget item, so best way to handle it, I figure, is for each of you gents to make out a check for one thousand Yankee dollars, payable to cash, and hand it over to Jacob here at the bank first thing tomorrow. He puts it all straight into my account, and there we are, no fuss, no big noise about it."

"Maybe not," said Jacob Sprague, "but that kind of transaction by the whole Board of Selectmen—"

"I didn't finish yet, Jacob," said Ralph Gibbs. "Didn't mention that I have already set up a meeting with the state people down to Concord three P.M. tomorrow. I figure around noon tomorrow I'll know whether to call it off or drive down there."

"Noon tomorrow," said Samuel Sprague. "And that finishes the agenda?"

"Not yet, Sam. There's them pay raises that keep getting left out of the budget every year. What I see for next year is a twenty percent raise across the board. That's for everybody in my department, including me. And two shiny new police cars with all extras, because them heaps we have now got were due for the scrap pile long ago. And that is the whole agenda." Ralph Gibbs rose and dumped the papers and folders before him into the shopping bag. He made a circuit around the table, sweeping the rest of the documents into it. He planted his cap squarely on his head. "Shouldn't rightly be here

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when the vote's taken, so I'll get along home now. Anyhow," he said from the door, "hate to miss the TV news any night. Never know what'll show up on it."

All eyes were on the door as it very gently closed behind him. The sound of footsteps down the corridor faded away.

"Lord almighty," whispered Fraser Smith.

The Naval Observatory clock on the wall ticked loudly, marking off a minute and then some.

"Well," said Samuel Sprague, "it looks like Ralph left us a motion here to vote on. No need to spell it out again, line for line. Anybody stand against it?" He waited a seemly time, then rapped his knuckles on the table. "The motion is adopted unanimously."

Benjamin Starr raised his hand.

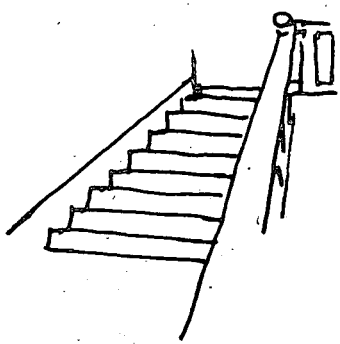
"Yes, Ben?" said Samuel Sprague.

"Well, it's about the new police cars, Sam. Looks to me that Starr's Cars could get a special discount from the manufacturer that'll—"

"No way." Samuel Sprague shook his head in reproach. "That is a conflict of interest for you, Ben, and you know it. Anything else?"

"That was it," said Benjamin Starr sadly.

"Then this meeting is herewith adjourned," said Samuel Sprague.



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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

"It's called a python reticulatus," *Wendy explained, "or reticulated python. It has teeth instead of fangs. Killing of its prey is effected by constriction. This one is quite docile. Would you like to hold him?"*

"No," Alan said.

"He's really a dear, Alan. Absolutely loves human warmth and stroking. We call him Apollo because he's so beautiful. He is *a bit spoiled, however."*

This past spring, Clark Howard won his second consecutive Golden Spur nomination for best short story of the year from the Western Writers of America—this one for "The Plateau" (EQMM, July 1984), the earlier one for "Custer's Ghost" (EQMM, May 1983). If honors were given specifically for stories about prisons and prisoners, we have no doubt Clark Howard would be walking away with a healthy share for his contribution to that subgenre as well . . .

LAST CHANCE IN SINGAPORE

by CLARK HOWARD

He was sipping a gin at the Dutch Club, a week after his return to Singapore, when he heard a soft voice speak to him.

"Hello. It's Alan Modred, isn't it?"

"Hello. Yes." Alan smiled as his eyes swept over her. Twentyish, wet auburn hair, slight overbite, tall, generally slim but a touch heavy in the hips. He dredged his memory without finding her.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" she chided.

"I'm sorry, no."

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"I'm Wenifred Travers. Wendy. Jack Travers' daughter."

Alan's jaw dropped in surprise. "My God. You've grown up to be a woman."

"Did you think I'd grow up to be a man?" He felt himself becoming flustered. She had an amused look on her face. "Next you'll be telling me I'm too old to be bounced on your knee."

"I don't know about *that,*" he countered with a smile. He took her hand. "How've you been, Wendy? How's Jack?"

Her expression saddened. "Daddy's dead, Alan. Lung cancer, two years ago."

"No. Oh, Wendy." Alan felt a clutch in his chest. Jack Travers had been a good man. "I'm so sorry," he told her.

Wendy nodded. "He was a two-pack-a-day man for thirty years. Every year the doctor told him to quit, but you know Daddy. Eventually it got him." She sighed and shrugged off the memory. "How long have you been back?"

"Just a week."

Wendy leaned toward him a fraction. "Was it terrible, Alan? The Thai prison?"

"It could have been worse," he lied. He wondered how she would react if he showed her the scars where they'd beaten him with a bamboo cane. He imagined she'd swoon. Sheltered young British women probably didn't see much proud flesh. Deciding to change the subject, he bobbed his chin at her wet hair. "Been for a swim?"

"Yes." She put on a halfhearted smile. "My friend Herman is a member here. He's a local rep for Heineken beer. We swim once or twice a week." She tilted her head. "Are you meeting someone?"

"Yes." Alan knew she expected to be told who he was meeting, but he didn't say. The less anyone knew about his activities in Singapore, the better. He directed the conversation back to her. "What made you stay on after Jack's death?" he asked. "You've family in the U.K., haven't you?"

"Not really. Not close, anyway. Singapore has always seemed more like home. Daddy and Mum are both buried here. And I've got a super job at the Jurong Reptile Farm, out near the bird park. There didn't seem much point in going back to England. Anyway, I hate the cold."

A waiter approached and said to Alan, "Excuse me, sir. Mr. van Leuck telephoned to say he was just getting on his way and would be here in a quarter hour."

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"Thank you." So much for secrecy, Alan thought. When he turned back to Wendy, she was looking at him curiously.

"Is that Louis van Leuck you're meeting?" There was a hint of accusation in her voice.

"It is." A hint of defensiveness in his.

"Oh, Alan. Must you get involved with that sort when you're just back to make a new start? Louis van Leuck is one of the shadiest characters in Singapore. He's involved in everything from drugs to gun smuggling. To—to—to white slavery."

"Is there still a white-slavery trade?" Alan asked. "I'll have to look into that."

"It's not funny, Alan."

He sighed quietly and fixed her in a steady gaze. "Would you like to know what's *really* not funny?" he asked evenly. "A forty-four-year-old man just back from five years in a Thai prison after being caught transporting jade illegally. That, after having failed at running an import-export business into which he had put his life savings. Before which he had two failed marriages, two *other* failed businesses, and one bankruptcy. At the moment, all he has to show for his life is a bleeding ulcer. *That's* not funny." He shook his head, the momentary hostility gone. "It's all well and good for you to denounce Louis van Leuck as a social undesirable, but the fact is, he's the only person in Singapore willing to talk to me about future employment."

"Yes, but what kind of employment?" She was not about to relent.

"At this point," Alan said flatly, "I can't really be selective, can I?"

Their eyes were locked in a mutually accusing stare when a handsome young Dutchman, his hair wet like Wendy's, walked up to them. Wendy broke the stare to introduce him as Herman Ubbink, the Heineken beer rep she had mentioned earlier. Herman reminded her that they had to meet people for lunch.

"Where can I reach you, Alan?" she wanted to know.

"I haven't found a permanent place yet," he said. It would have been too embarrassing to tell her he had a seedy little room on Serangoon Street in the Little India quarter.

"Please ring me up," Wendy said. "I'm listed."

"Of course."

Alan watched them leave, two vibrant young people with good tans, good posture, good prospects, and all the time in the world ahead of them.

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Deep inside, his ulcer began to churn.

Louis van Leuck reminded Alan of Sydney Greenstreet. He wore a white linen shirt with a Nehru collar and sat bent very close to the table so that he could keep an elbow on either side of the plate while he ate. They were in the Swatow Restaurant high up in Centrepoint, an ultramodern, multilevel shopping center to which van Leuck had taken Alan after leaving the Dutch Club. They were eating *dim sum,* a kind of rolling buffet in which trolleys filled with numerous Chinese dishes passed continuously among the tables.

"Try some of that baked tench, my boy," van Leuck prompted. "It's the best fish to come out of China in years."

"I don't have much appetite for fish after eating boiled fish heads every day for five years."

"Try the duck skin, then. It's wrapped around spring onions and cucumbers, coated in black bean sauce. Delicious."

"I'll just have a little boiled chicken and rice," Alan said. "I have a minor stomach problem." Minor. When it wasn't causing him nausea, excruciating cramps, or bleeding.

The food trolleys were being pushed by slim Chinese women wearing *sarong kabayas* slit on one side up to the thigh. They served whichever dishes the patrons indicated they wanted. One of the women had a slight overbite that made Alan think of Wendy Travers. Presumptuous little bitch, he thought. What did she expect him to do, starve? Beg? How simple life always looked to the young.

"Do you have anything for me, Louis?" he finally asked when they were halfway through their second course.

"I wish I did have, my boy," the overweight Dutchman said. "But things are very, very slow right now. There's lots of official pressure about. Election year and all that." He lowered his voice. "If you'd care to get involved with the, ah—snow, shall we call it?—I might be able to arrange something. It would mean moving to Manila, of course. I don't fool around with that trade in Singapura—too dangerous. Mandatory death penalty, you know."

Alan shook his head. "I don't care to get into that sort of business." Hadn't he just told Wendy he wasn't in a position to be selective? Now here he was, being exactly that.

"Locally," van Leuck said, "I'm expanding my chain of sexual massage parlors, but I really like to have women managing them—they're so much more reliable, especially Chinese women." He stuffed his mouth with food and talked around it. "I dabble in

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contraband ivory here, but only on a small scale—not really enough profit there to share. Stolen airline tickets bring in a little. Counterfeit designer purses and other items make a modest amount, despite some really aggressive competition from Malaysia. And then there's my pornography operation: magazines, video tapes, uncensored books. Again, the tight customs controls make that a limited-profits enterprise. I expect things to loosen up by this time next year, however."

"How nice," Alan said. "If I'd known there was a business recession, I would have arranged to stay in prison an extra year."

"That's very funny, my boy," van Leuck said, a bit of orange yam falling to his chin as he spoke. Then his eyes narrowed to slits that could have held matchsticks. "There is one venture currently in the planning stages," he said hesitantly. "It could be a bit out of the ordinary for you, as well as somewhat risky, but the reward would be considerable. I myself am involved only in marketing the project and, ah—shall we say, converting the acquired product. The actual planning and operation is being done by someone else, but I understand he's a man short. I could recommend you, if you like."

"What's the venture?" Alan asked.

"I'm not at liberty to say. That would have to come from the man at the other end, once he approved you."

Alan rubbed his chin, his interest piqued. "Considerable reward, you say?"

"Very."

"But risky?"

"To some degree."

Alan was silent for a long moment, but finally nodded. "All right, Louis. I'll accept your recommendation, with gratitude."

"Excellent, my boy."

Louis van Leuck smiled and waved over another trolley of food.

That evening, Alan walked slowly up Sago Lane in Chinatown. It was a narrow road, vibrant with streetside activity, sounds, and smells. The fragrance of incense mingled with the smell of frying noodles. Street hawkers chattered among themselves, quieting down and watching as Alan passed to see if he had any interest in their candles, citrus, dry goods, or beansprouts. The cackle of seven Chinese dialects punctuated the night as old women in *samfus* and homemade clogs gossiped in street stalls and tenement entries.

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Chinese children, spotlessly clean even at play, dashed about, giggling at their simple games.

At the corner of Trengganu, Alan stopped and looked around. A young Chinese woman spoke to him from a doorway. *"Chuang?"* she said, opening her kimono a few inches.

Alan shook his head. *"Bu,"* he replied. The fleeting thought of going to bed with her made him think for some reason of Wendy. Irritably, he purged his mind of the thought. *"Shu ben shi chang?"* he asked the woman in the doorway. She closed her kimono and pointed down the street. Alan nodded. *"Xie xie ny,"* he said, thanking her.

Walking down to the bookstore he had inquired about, Alan entered. It was a musty little shop, barely four square meters, with no shelves, its books all stacked on several tables as if the owner was prepared to abandon the premises. An old Chinese man in a mandarin coat sat in one corner on an upturned wooden box with a cushion tied to it, smoking through an ivory cigarette holder. He looked sixty, but because Chinese men age so slowly, Alan judged him to be at least seventy-five.

"Wan an, Fu qin," Alan said respectfully. Good evening, Father.

"My humble shop is yours, my son," the old man replied in precise English.

"I seek a gentleman named Dao," Alan said.

The old man shook his head. "You are too late. He is dead. He died from being *jiu*. *Jiu* meant very old.

"I was sent here by the *jing ly* named van Leuck," Alan said, referring to the Dutchman as a boss or manager.

"In that case, I am not dead," the old Chinese admitted. He smiled slyly. "I am *jiu,* however, and will probably die shortly, but that need be no concern of yours." He rose and offered his hand. Welcome. I am Dao."

Alan shook hands and followed him into a curtained corner where there were two more box-and-cushion seats and a small table. *"Cha?"* the old man asked. Tea?

"Boleh." Please.

The teapot was set over a burning candle in the well formed by an arrangement of three bricks, keeping it constantly hot without boiling. From a closed wicker basket inside the box on which he sat, Dao removed two beautiful, delicate teacups, each fashioned with symbolic tigers etched in gold, with ruby chips for eyes. Alan, who

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knew of such things, judged them to be at least one hundred years old. He watched the old Chinese fill them with herbal tea.

The two men sipped their *cha* in silence until the cups were half empty. Then Dao asked, "Do you know the meaning of my name?"

"I believe it means 'knife,' " said Alan.

"Yes. In my youth, when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, I was called Nan Ren Dao. Man of the Knife. An undeserved tribute to a very modest talent. There are those who insist that I could split a swinging pear at fifteen meters. Not being a vain man, I myself never measured the distance. The years, of course, have taken their toll on my eyesight, and my arms have become flaccid and feeble. Fortunately, I have a grandnephew to whom I passed on what little skill I had. He is now the eyes and arms of the man once called Nan Ren Dao. Loyal and respectful young relatives are a blessing to the aged, do you not agree?"

"I do, yes," said Alan. The old man's warning was unmistakable: betray me and my grandnephew will throw a knife into you. Alan heard the shop door open and a moment later a young Chinese woman came around the curtain. She was the same woman who had solicited Alan at the corner.

"My grandnephew's wife," Dao said. "I am happy to know you are not a man who is easily tempted, even after five years of enforced abstinence."

Alan bowed his head an inch. "And I am happy to have passed your test, *Fu qin*. Please tell your grandnephew that it was not easy. His wife is a *mei li funu*."

The young woman suppressed a smile at being called a beautiful lady. As she took her coat from a peg and left, Alan had a fleeting thought of Wendy again. She and the Chinese woman carried the same touch of heaviness in their hips. Why, he wondered, could he not get Wendy out of his mind? Was it desire? It was true, as Dao had said, that he had been away from women for five years. Plus a week, as a matter of fact, because he still had not had any sex since his release. That fact was a little disturbing to him—he was beginning to wonder if the years in prison, the beatings and other brutalities, the inadequate diet, the occasional sicknesses, the parasites, the constant close exposure to unrelenting dampness during the monsoon seasons had all conspired to make him impotent?

Dao interrupted Alan's brief moment of worry by striking a stick match to light a fresh cigarette in his ivory holder. Then he said,

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"So. You are interested in joining a modest venture we have planned?"

"Yes."

"Did Herr van Leuck give you any details of the project?"

"No."

"Ah. Well, as I said, it is a modest venture. We are going to rob the Singapore mint."

Alan stared incredulously at the old man. Dao smiled and reached for the teapot.

"More *cha?*" he asked.

The next day, Alan rode one of Singapore's immaculately clean buses out toward Jurong Town, on the western end of the island where the mint was located. From the road along one side of the compound, where he got off the bus to walk, he was able to take a good, leisurely look at it without arousing suspicion.

Actually, there was not all that much to see. It looked a bit like a small prison—unadorned buildings set some distance back from an electrified cyclone fence topped with accordion wire, with gun towers at the corners. Pretty much impregnable, Alan decided, as far as an armed robbery assault was concerned. Their plan, however—he was already thinking of it as partly *his*—did not involve assault or arms. As with drugs, the mere possession of cartridges, much less a weapon in which to use them, carried a mandatory death penalty in Singapore. One had to be a fool to tempt such easily administered capital punishment, and Dao was anything but a fool. No, their plan was devoid of violence—much less dangerous and considerably less offensive to the Singapore government. They were not even planning to steal *Singapore* money, only Malaysian notes printed under contract by the Singapore mint. That way, Dao reasoned, if they were caught the Singapore courts might be a little more lenient.

As for their method, it was quite simple: they were going to execute the robbery through a tunnel, at night.

As Alan walked along the road, surreptitiously scrutinizing the mint, he recalled Dao's words of the previous night. "The tunnel was already there when the mint was built above it," the old Chinese had explained. "When the Japanese occupied Singapore during World War Two, in addition to the notorious prison camp at Changi on the eastern end of the island, they also had a smaller camp, for women, at Boon Lay. Prisoners there were nurses, nuns, British

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officers' wives and daughters, unmarried Occidentals who had been employed in the city at the time it fell, and a smattering of Eurasian women who qualified for confinement as a result of their mixed blood.

"These women knew their camp was very close to a narrow inlet that came in from the south coast of the island. Many of them had been on family outings around there in happier times and were quite familiar with the area. They reasoned that if they could get out of the camp and reach the inlet, they could, with jewelry many of them had concealed in their hair, barter with the rural natives to acquire dugout boats. With those boats they could sail to any one of the isolated southern islands, which in those days were not developed at all. There they intended to live off wild game and fruit, and possibly cultivate vegetable gardens of some kind. Whatever conditions they encountered, they were unanimously convinced that they would be better off than in their present circumstances, which were resulting in scurvy, rickets, dysentery, and numerous other trying physical problems.

"So they set about digging a tunnel. It had to be deep enough to remain undetected for a long period of time, large enough for a person to crawl through on hands and knees, and long enough to take them outside the barbed-wire fence and far enough away from the camp to avoid the perimeter sentries. They estimated that it would take them two years to complete it. Work was begun in March, nineteen forty-two.

"By June, nineteen forty-three, the women had progressed beyond the wire and were well on their way through—or shall I say *under*—the jungle. At that point, however, their Japanese captors closed the camp and moved the entire group to another facility in nearby Sumatra.

"Louis van Leuck learned of the tunnel while visiting London and watching a television show on the BBC called *This Is Your Life*. It was honoring Brigadier Dame Margot Turner, the former Matron-in-Chief of the Royal Army Nursing Corps. While Dame Margot herself was never in the Boon Lay camp, one of the women who was subsequently with her in the Muntok camp in Sumatra, and who had appeared on the show, had been at Boon Lay earlier, and commented on the tunnel they had dug there.

"Louis van Leuck, whose thinking coincides with my own unfortunate proclivity for felonious endeavors, checked upon his return to Singapore all the land and building records for the area where

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the Boon Lay camp had been, and where the mint now is, and found no indication that the existence of the tunnel was known. He then took it upon himself to personally explore the acreage in question, in the guise of a botanist studying the island's flora. After several weeks of diligent effort, his initiative was rewarded. He found that the tunnel does, in fact, still exist. Louis has not divulged the location as yet, but I am told that it leads from a point approximately three hundred meters outside the mint compound and terminates directly under what is now the bundling room, where new currency is packaged for shipment."

Dao had gone on to explain to Alan exactly how the robbery would be carried out. There would be no guns, no violence, no contact with any of the mint's nighttime security force. Alan and Dao's grandnephew would negotiate the tunnel and, with tools, battery-operated drills, and duffel bags, wait just below the bundling room. At a predetermined time, Dao and the grandnephew's wife would set off across the road a sequence of spectacular Chinese fireworks, which would have been previously arranged in a wooded area there.

While the mint security guards were distracted by the fireworks display, timed to last at least twenty minutes, Alan and the grandnephew would break through the bundling room floor (ten minutes), fill the duffel bags—six of them, connected by lengths of rope—with all the packaged Malaysian money and any other foreign banknotes they could find (five minutes), then drop back into the tunnel, pull the bags in behind them, and crawl back through the tunnel (five minutes). At the tunnel mouth, they would drag the connected bags through, remove them, and cave in that end of the tunnel with a light explosive device they would leave behind, the display fireworks covering the sound.

It was, Alan thought, a plan brilliant in its simplicity —comparatively uninvolved, limited in operation to a very few, able to be carried out in an incredibly short period of time. It had the potential of netting, Dao estimated, ten to fifteen million Malaysian dollars.

Alan had already figured out what his share would be. Say they got twelve million Malay. Louis van Leuck would take ten percent (one million, two) off the top, his fee for conceiving the operation. That would leave ten-point-eight million. Louis would further profit by seeing to the transport and conversion of the currency, buying it from Dao at sixty percent of its face value, about six-and-one-half million. Alan's share of that would be around one-point-six million Malay. At the current exchange rate of $2.20 Malay to U.S. $1.00,

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he would have somewhere in the neighborhood of seven hundred and forty thousand U.S. dollars.

And that, Alan promised himself, was going to do him for life. There would be no opening of any business with *this* money, no risky speculation trying to make a big killing, no living it up in the fast lane. Much wiser after his term in the Thai prison, Alan had modified his wants and desires to a sensible minimum. Where once he needed—or at least wanted—tailormade clothes, an expensive car, someplace opulent in which to live, he now yearned for nothing more than a cozy room, peace and quiet, comfortable slippers, some books, a television, medication for his ulcer, and anonymity. The cane beatings had done that to him. The scars on his buttocks and calves would forever remind him that the simplest things in life were by far the most valuable.

This venture, Alan was certain, was his very last chance for a decent existence. Probably his last chance for anything in life. There was no question in his mind that he had to take the chance even though the prospect of doing it terrified him.

Walking away from the area of the mint compound, Alan encountered a directional sign that read JURONG BIRD PARK. He remembered Wendy Travers saying she worked at a reptile farm near there. Without debating it, he decided to go see her. She was more or less constantly on his mind, and he didn't know why or what to do about it. Perhaps seeing her again would give him a clue.

The farm was a walled area much smaller than he had imagined. Inside the walls were two exhibition structures in which some species of reptiles were on display behind glass. In two exterior areas, others were kept behind fine grille-wire in ground cages with corrugated roofs. Upon inquiry, Alan was directed to one of the cages, where he found Wendy, in safari clothes, holding and stroking a fire-hose-sized snake which hung down to the ground and appeared to be at least seven or eight meters long. Alan stared incredulously until Wendy noticed him.

"Alan! I'm so glad to see you!" Her overbite smile lighted up a freshly scrubbed face.

"I'm not sure I can say the same," Alan told her. "I expected to find you behind a typewriter, not a snake."

She smiled. "No boring typewriters for me, Alan. I'm assistant to Professor Angus Ferguson, one of the world's foremost authorities

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on reptiles. He's written several field guides on reptilia and amphibia. You can come a little closer, Alan—they can't get out."

Hesitantly, Alan moved up to the cage grille. "Aren't you afraid that thing might strike?" he asked, regarding the long blue-and-brown-patterned snake with unconcealed revulsion.

Wendy shook her head. "This is a non-venomous species," she explained. "It's called a *python reticulatus,* or reticulated python. It has teeth instead of fangs. Killing of its prey is effected by constriction. This one is quite docile. Would you like to hold him?"

"No," Alan said.

"He's really a dear, Alan. Absolutely loves human warmth and stroking. We call him Apollo because he's so beautiful. He *is* a bit spoiled, however."

Wendy put the python on the ground and came out of the cage. Alan had to steel himself not to flinch when she casually took his arm with hands that had just cuddled Apollo.

"What made you decide to come see me?" she asked.

"I was in the area," he replied vaguely.

"Oh. Well, I'm glad anyway. I'm off in half an hour. If you haven't a car, you can ride back to the city with me. I might even cook for you this evening if you encourage me a little."

He touched one of her hands, forgetting about Apollo. "You've always been a very sweet girl, Wendy."

She smiled sadly. "That's what Daddy used to call me, remember? His sweet girl."

"Yes, I do," he said.

When her shift was over, Wendy led him to a BMW with a right-hand drive, and they started for the city. On the way, they drove past the mint compound and Alan could not help staring at it. Wendy noticed his preoccupation with curiosity but did not comment.

She lived in a small apartment at the back of a garden complex off Orchard Link. It was bi-level, secluded, and had a tiny private patio and garden. "This is lovely," Alan told her.

"A lot of things were Mum's," she said, gesturing toward the furnishings. "Or Daddy's. That's his leather chair there, remember? Why don't you sit in it while I fix you a gin?"

Wendy had a drink with him while they reminisced a bit, then left him with a second gin while she went off to the kitchen. "Do you still like those outrageous omelets with all sorts of things in them that you and Daddy used to wolf down?" she asked.

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"Yes, but they no longer like me," he called back. "I've a bit of a stomach problem—just eggs-and-cheese will do fine."

"You're easy," she said. "I may keep you."

It was not a cool Singapore evening, but it was tolerable enough for them to eat on the tiny patio and enjoy the little garden, which she had lit with Chinese lanterns. As they ate, she said, "Listen, Alan, forgive me, but I'm still troubled about your contact with Louis van Leuck. A man of your intelligence and capabilities shouldn't have to go over to the shady side to earn a living. I've been thinking. You remember my friend Herman Ubbink you met at the Dutch Club? Well, Heineken is transferring him to London next month. He has a friend he plays squash with, Steven Howard, who's head of marketing for *Time*. Steven's giving Herman a big going-away bash and there'll be all sorts of Singapore business types there. Why don't you come with me and I'll introduce you around. We can say you've just moved back here from South America or someplace and are looking for a niche. I'm almost sure someone would ask you to come around and talk. What do you think?"

Alan smiled fondly at her across the table. "I think you're 'a sweet girl' to be so concerned about my future. I appreciate it and I'm touched by it. It's been a long spell since anyone gave more than passing interest to my well-being. But I must tell you, dear Wendy, that I think you're being naive. Suppose someone at the party *was* interested? How long do you think that interest would last when I had to provide references for the last five years? Or when they ran a local credit check on me and learned of the two failed businesses and the bankruptcy? Or even worse, applied for a work permit for me and a police check showed I was extradited from here to Bangkok to face jade-smuggling charges for which I was subsequently sent to prison?" Reaching over, he put his hand on hers. "I know you mean well, Wendy, but it simply wouldn't work. I've got only one last chance here in Singapore and that's with Louis van Leuck."

Wendy fought back tears and abruptly came around the table and sat on his lap, as she had done as a child. She pressed her face against him and he felt wet eyelashes on his neck. "I'm just so afraid for you," she said in a strained voice. "It hasn't been that long since I lost Daddy. Now I've found you, Alan, and I don't want to lose you, too."

"I know." Alan patted her head, again as if she were still the little girl he remembered—all the while realizing by the heat and shape of her body against his that she was not.

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She felt the heat, too, felt everything, and whispered, "Let's go in, Alan."

He slept very soundly for the first hour after they made love. Wendy hadn't blanched at the sight of his horrible scars, had in fact kissed them in her passion, and his self-consciousness about his age, his physical condition, the fear of impotency had all vanished in the indulgences of their lovemaking.

Then it started to rain, a heavy monsoon deluge that threatened to tear shutters off, and he dreamed briefly about the Thai prison before coming awake and sitting bolt upright in a sheet of sweat. He was not cold but he was trembling. Wendy cradled his head against her.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes. God, yes."

"Tell me what of."

Alan swallowed as much fear as he could and replied, "The tunnel. I'm afraid of the tunnel."

Then, in the darkness, his face pressed to the softness of her, he told her about the plan to rob the mint. About the hundred-meter tunnel he and Dao's grandnephew would have to crawl through. And about a punishment in the Thai prison called 'the trench.'

"It was like a grave," he said. "A deep, earthen grave with narrow walls. They tied your arms to your sides, tied your ankles together, and put you in a burlap shroud up to your throat. Then they lowered you into the trench on your back. A wooden plank was lowered above you until it almost touched your face. It was held in place by four ropes tied to stakes at the corners of the trench. With the board in place, dirt was shoveled in by other prisoners. While you lay there helpless, you heard shovelfuls of dirt hitting the plank just over your face. Some of the dirt trickled down each side. Slowly the daylight disappeared and you were buried alive."

Alan pushed his sweating face harder against her, as if her flesh could erase the memory. "I was put in the trench four times," he told her. "Each time I thought I would lose my mind. Or suffocate. But the bastards always got me out in time. They had it down to a science. A few died in the trench, but not many."

"The tunnel under the mint reminds you of the trench," Wendy said.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Daddy," she told him. "He was a prisoner during the war. Years

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later he was still having associated nightmares and depression and such. You're afraid you can't make it through the tunnel, aren't you?"

"Yes. The thought of crawling through that long, narrow, dark hole—" Alan shook his head desperately. "It terrifies me."

"Then don't do it," Wendy said. "Say you can't."

"They wouldn't let me. I know all the particulars of the plan now. After all, I did *ask* to be let in. Anyway, even if they did let me back out, if anything went wrong when they pulled the job they'd never believe I wasn't somehow responsible. No, I'm afraid I'll have to stay in."

"Drop out of sight, then," Wendy pleaded. "Move in here with me. They'd never find you."

Alan shook his head. "That would be prison all over again. I'd never be able to go out on the streets for fear one of van Leuck's people would see me." He took a deep breath. "I'm just going to have to steel myself for it, that's all. I'm going to have to get through it."

In the darkness, Wendy whispered, "Maybe we can think of something."

"Sure," Alan said. His tone told her he didn't for a moment believe it.

The robbery was scheduled for Tuesday night, just before the Wednesday shipment of banknotes to Malaysia.

Alan still had his room in the Indian quarter even though he had been staying with Wendy most of the time. He returned to the room only to get messages. She had gone with him once and found the place disgusting. "This is awful," she said. "You're so fastidious, just like Daddy was—I don't see how you can stand it."

"I shouldn't have to stand it much longer," he said.

Wendy wasn't with him on the weekend when he got the message that Dao wanted to see him. In the bookstore, the old Chinese told him when the robbery was scheduled. On Monday night, Alan shared the information with Wendy.

"The fireworks are being put into place tonight. Dao and I will go to van Leuck's house in the morning and he'll show us on a map where the tunnel entrance is. It's supposedly well grown over with brush and vines, very difficult to find, but easily accessible once one knows where to look. I won't be able to stay with you tonight, Wendy. I'll have to be where Dao can reach me in case there's a last-minute change of plans."

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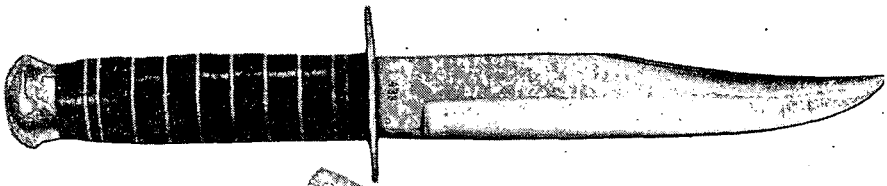

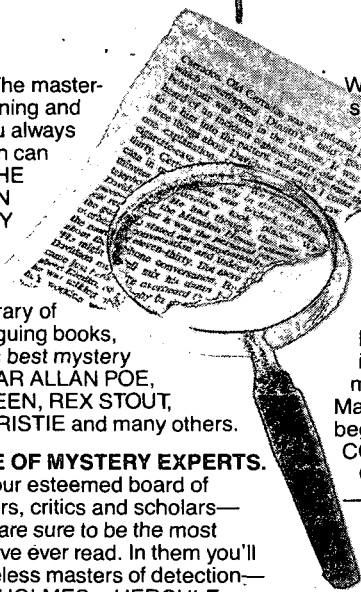

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"I understand," said Wendy. "Where does van Leuck live, anyway?"

"Upper Thomson Road. Why?"

She shrugged. "I just wondered where a person like that would live. One always wonders about people like van Leuck. They're morbidly fascinating, like some of our reptiles at the farm. The venomous ones."

"I imagine Louis can be venomous, all right," Alan agreed. "Especially if anyone crossed him."

"You still don't think there's a chance they'd let you pull out?"

He shook his head. "It's too far along now." He took both her hands. "I don't know what I'd have done without you this past week. Gone mad, most likely."

When Alan and Dao arrived at van Leuck's house the following morning, they were surprised to find a police car, an ambulance, and a plain, unmarked panel truck there ahead of them.

"We have trouble," Dao said. He instructed his grandnephew, who was chauffeuring them, to keep driving and park around the corner. Then he sent the young man back on foot to investigate. The grandnephew returned within five minutes, an expression of shock on his face.

"Mr. van Leuck is dead, Great-uncle," he said. "A most tragic occurrence. A python somehow got into his house last night, wrapped its body around Mr. van Leuck's head and face, and smothered him. The panel truck you saw in front is from the reptile farm. They sent two keepers to capture the snake. Alas, for the unfortunate Mr. van Leuck it is too late."

"As it also is for us," Dao said quietly. "Take us back to my shop."

The three men rode in silence back to Chinatown. Only when they arrived did Alan ask the obvious question.

"Will you try to find the tunnel yourself, *Fu qin?*"

"I think not," the old man said. "The snake was a sign. It came out of the jungle to tell us that the tunnel belongs to the jungle, not to us. Perhaps the snakes now use the tunnel for their home. In any event, I think we will listen to the snake."

Alan saw a look of enormous relief come over the face of Dao's grandnephew. So, he thought, I was not the only one terrified of that hole.

"It shall be as you wish," Alan told Dao.

He shook hands with the old Chinese and left. On South Bridge,

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he caught a taxi and rode up to Serangoon where he had his cheap little room. Wendy was waiting in her BMW out front.

"I have your things," she said. His canvas bag was in the back seat. "And I settled your bill. Let's get away from this filthy place."

Alan got in beside her. She drove away, calm and unruffled as if she had not committed murder.

"Was it Apollo?" Alan asked.

"Yes. I told you, didn't I, he likes human warmth?"

"Yes, I recall you saying that." Alan's mouth was suddenly dry. "Well, what now?" he asked as casually as he could manage.

"You'll come live with me," Wendy said. "You can have Daddy's chair. I'll be your little girl. Just like I was his."

Alan stared at her without blinking.

"All right?" she asked.

Wrapped its body around Mr. van Leuck's head and face—

"Of course," Alan agreed. "Whatever you say."

Inside, his ulcer reminded him it was still there.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

According to Frank Kermode in an essay in The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory *(edited by Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), a detective's best weapon is "an explosion of truth" . . .*

TV DOPE SHOW

by ROBERT TWOHY

At 5:00 P.M. Weare filtered out the door, never looked back—clean getaway.

Two great old films were showing at the great old Fox Theater on Main Street four blocks from the Courthouse: *Suspicion* and *Dial M for Murder*. As a Hitchcock buff, he was looking forward.

First show was at 7:00—he'd have dinner.

An April wind muscled him as he hurried through the big parking lot behind the Courthouse to his '77 red Pinto and a few minutes later he was westbound toward El Camino, and Heine's Hofbrau.

At the Greyhound on Brewster he swung in—when in the neighborhood he usually browsed it. A few times he had spotted someone he was looking for, about to ramble to far places.

Four or five citizens were waiting in the wide area behind the depot. No one he knew. But a scrawny kid with a backpack raised a tentative hand. Weare pulled off to the side, out of the way if a bus came charging through, and watched the kid meander toward him. The face was mainly nose, two small wary eyes at the top. "You're Sergeant Weare." Weare nodded. "I saw you in jail. A guy in my tank said who you were. I thought he was kidding. You look more like a minister."

Weare, small and grey, had started professional life as a minister

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in Ohio. Seven years later he was in California, a juvenile probation officer. Seven years later, working good connections, he became San Mateo County's oldest living sheriff's rookie. Now seventeen years later, he was a detective-sergeant, more or less in charge of homicide though Captain Losey had the title. But Losey's job was mostly to talk at civic luncheons and impress people involved in county funding, leaving not much time to run investigations. So Weare had gradually taken over that function—fine by Losey.

"Do you know a dude named Frank Reese?"

Weare did.

"He has a sawed-off shotgun."

Weare asked, "Want to get in out of the wind?"

"My bus is about due. I just thought that maybe you ought to know. I mean that Reese has a shotgun."

"Have you seen it?" If the kid had, he'd be the first direct witness to it. Other dopers who had mentioned it seemed to have never actually seen it, just heard about it.

The kid said that he'd never actually seen it.

"Do you know anything else about him I should know?"

"Sometimes you read in the paper that a body's been found—then if you see Reese that night he's grinning and spending money and passing out good dope."

The kid wasn't telling him anything he hadn't heard from other dopers, adding up to nothing. "What were you in jail for?"

"Why?"

Weare shrugged.

"Dope. They dropped the charges."

"So you're clear."

"Uh huh." A San Francisco bus came pounding around the depot. Weare called, "Thanks." The kid waved, loped away, and jumped aboard.

Weare drove a mile south on El Camino to Heine's.

Savoring prime roast beef, he let his idling brain turn to his last talk with Reese.

Two months ago, about 10:00 P.M., he had spotted a battered, rump-sprung LTD painted dead-black in the parking lot near the S.P. station in Lindenvale. Reese was in the donut shop on the corner, at a table alone.

Weare had showed him a drawing that was a reconstruction from a photo of the remains of the face of a dead young man found buried on a little-used beach south of Half Moon Bay a few days before,

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where the M. E. guessed he had been disintegrating probably since last fall. Two .22 shotgun shells were in the back of the skull.

Reese, black-bearded and burly, thirty years old, in his standard uniform of black denim jacket, black jeans, and black stomper boots, studied the drawing and said he didn't know the guy. Weare said that some people he had talked to had thought the drawing resembled someone they had seen last October or so in Reese's car.

Reese nodded. "Figures. Every time a body's found, my name comes up." His brown eyes could look flat and dull or somewhat amused, like now. "Know who started all those rumors about me?" Weare said he hadn't thought about it. "Me, couple of years ago. I began dropping hints that I had a shotgun, that a dope mafia operated on the Peninsula, and the less known what I did for a living the better."

What Reese did for a living Weare hadn't nailed down. Reese had told him that he had inherited money, which he'd invested. His smirk said that if Weare didn't believe that, okay by him. Weare hadn't pushed the matter—no point at the time or since.

"The kids picked up on the rumors. Why? Because they'd left their straight homes, most of them, looking for excitement, a heavy scene. That's what I give them, what they relate to—a TV show."

"You're the star."

"You got it, Mr. Weare." He turned to look out the big window by the table, grinned fiercely and waved to someone out there, murmured, "That chick'll spread around you're grilling me about this latest murder. So the show goes on. I began it and the kids keep it running."

Weare sipped coffee. "Why did you tell me this?"

"I guess I was in the mood."

"What if I spread it around?"

"Wouldn't matter. The kids would say I was running a con on you. They want TV, not reality." He flipped a finger at Weare. "So do you—cops, I mean."

"We're in the show, too?"

"Aren't you?"

Weare gave his slight smile. He touched the pocket where he had slid the drawing of the dead boy. "Him, too?"

"Don't lay him on me. He's your contribution, not mine."

Weare had left on that note and hadn't seen Reese since.

The body had never been identified. The boy might have been brought a long way from home, wherever home was. Vague word

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that he might have been with Reese in October was nothing Weare could build on.

Leaving Heine's, he mulled on what Reese had said—that everyone on and around the scene, dopers and cops and deputies, were mixed up in a show starring Reese, which the dead boy and other corpses had been no part of until dragged in by Weare or other lawmen, providing new thrills for the star's young doper fans.

He got his mind on the two classic movies he was heading for, much pleasanter to think about than that he might be a supporting stooge in The Frank Reese Show.

The next three hours were a trip in Hitchcock's world of elegant wickedry, not crime as is or ever was but as should be. Just once Weare would like to be involved in a case like *Dial M,* clean and crisp and winding up in a neat package, all questions answered, no slop left over. In seventeen years that hadn't happened, but after a Hitchcock evening he could indulge in a dream or two.

At the left-turn lane on Howard in San Carlos, waiting behind a car for the green arrow, something caught the corner of his right eye—an LTD, dead-black and lopsided, looming in the curb lane, sliding beyond him to the red light. If the lane immediately right hadn't been vacant, he might have missed it, made his left, and proceeded on home with no further thoughts of Frank Reese.

The scrap of profile he could glimpse between beard and shaggy black hair was turned left and slightly down—Reese seemed to be scowling fixedly at the side mirror, unaware of Weare.

Weare made his left, turned right the first block, scurried down Laurel to San Carlos Avenue, right-turned again, and hung in the left-turn lane, as northbound cars piled by on El Camino, the LTD not among them.

Half a minute later, he was cruising north, playing a hunch based on no more than the way Reese had been fixed on the side mirror, like super-watchful if anyone was coming up behind him.

Starting down the slope into Belmont, he got on the brake as ahead to the right, in the wide parking area at CooCoo's Nut Haven, he saw a cop cruiser's amber light. Pulled up just beyond it was the LTD.

He slid the Pinto fifty feet beyond, got out, and sauntered over. Leaning against the rear door of his car with his arms folded was Reese, a San Carlos cop fronting him. The wind had stopped gusting but the air was cold.

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Reese flashed his teeth at Weare, got back a slight smile. Weare showed the thin young cop his badge, asked what was up, and learned that Reese had made an illegal lane change, cutting in front of the cruiser.

Reese made a face. "First ticket in five years. Really stupid." The brown eyes were murky.

The cop got his signature, gifted him with the ticket, looked a question at Weare, who asked Reese if he'd wait a minute and walked to the cruiser, nodded to the cop's even younger partner at the wheel, waited until the cop had slid in, then leaned in and murmured, "Did you ask him to get out?"

"No, he got out on his own—why?"

Reese was leaning on the LTD, looking their way. He could have waited in the car but seemed to prefer outside in the cold.

Weare asked if they would hang around a few minutes, walked to Reese, and asked if they could talk in the car. Reese shrugged and moved to the door. Weare walked around and got in beside him, sat looking at him.

Reese asked after a while, "What's up, Mr. Weare?"

Weare kept up his steady grey gaze. Reese tripped his tongue around his lips and the murky eyes flickered to the back of the car.

—A mess as always. On the floor some empty oil cans, tools, frayed skin mags, cans of food, wads of dirty clothes, empty wine bottles, general junk. A brown army blanket was heaped along the seat.

Weare studied it, reached over, fiddled with a chunk of it. Reese said, "It just happens to be lying like that."

"Like what?"

"Like it is."

"Like covering something?"

Reese got up a smile. "You thinking of a sawed-off shotgun?"

Weare got a grip on the chunk. Reese asked, "Don't you have to have reasonable cause?"

"You mentioned a shotgun." He supposed that as reasonable cause that was questionable, like just about everything a cop does. He wanted a look under the blanket.

He pulled, but it was hooked on something. Twisting himself around, he got a knee on the seat, made a two-handed grab, and jerked hard.

—Gazed at a small girl in blue jeans and a plaid shirt lying on her side, knees aimed at him, heels behind her, the small thin white face under a pile of light-brown hair at the far end of the seat. The

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arm on top went behind her hip. Strapping-tape was wrapped around the lower half of her face. Shiny blue eyes stared back at him.

Dropping the blanket on the junk on the floor, he got out, waving to the San Carlos cops as he walked to Reese's side of the car. Reese spread his hands and said in a jagged voice, "Not what it seems."

Weare opened the door and Reese came out. As Weare gestured, he turned to the car, took a step back, and laid himself forward, hands against the top.

Weare went over him and found under the denim jacket a sheath with a six-inch Buck knife, more or less legal. He unclipped it and slid it into his coat pocket.

The cop had come up, his partner drifting behind. Weare asked if he would cuff Reese, who turned obediently, hands behind his back. Weare asked, "Who is she?"

"Gale something—one of the kids on the scene. She's not hurt."

Three or four cars had slid into the wide area and a few drinkers stood at the door of the Nut Haven, checking the doings.

Weare murmured that maybe the cop could put Reese in his cruiser. The cop said he'd call in. Weare nodded, turned to the LTD, and got in back, shoving junk with his legs until he had space to crouch at the girl's head.

He saw how the tape was wrapped six or seven times around, lapping over itself, found the end, and, picking up her head, ripped the tape, changing hands, giving the last lap a fast rip from her lips, balling the tape, and dropping it on the wadded brown blanket. "What's your name?"

She worked her mouth, stretching her cheeks. He started to unwind tape from her wrists.

"Is your name Gale?"

"No. Petunia." He glanced. Her eyes were the same, wide and shiny. "That was Mother's name, too. Mother was a frog. I started as a tadpole but grew into a swan."

He had unbound her wrists, was down at her ankles. "Are you hurt?"

"Endlessly. I float on a lake of tears—like Alice. My name is Alice. Do you remember Alice, Ben Bolt? Sweet Alice, whose hair was so brown? I have a beautiful long neck and bright swan eyes." Bright doper eyes.

"Where was Reese taking you?"

"Father was a lizard, we lost him in a blizzard." Ankles free, she swung her legs and sat up, rubbing her wrists, working her mouth.

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He got out. Two San Carlos cruisers and one from Belmont had curved into the area, intimidating the gawker cars on their way. Drinkers clustered at the door of the Nut Haven and were ignored. One of the Belmont cops, wide and low with grey hair, said, "Hello, Weare." He was Sergeant Dolan. "You got something on Reese?"

"He had that girl taped up and under a blanket. She'd doped but doesn't seem hurt." He walked with Dolan and a couple of cops to the cruiser, where Reese sat behind the screen, watching. Weare got in, Reese sliding centerward to give room. The two young cops in front watched and listened. "What's her last name?"

"I never heard it."

"Where does she live?"

"She has a van, an old green Dodge."

"Where?"

"I dunno."

"How about parents?"

"Somewhere, I guess."

"Why did you have her taped up, under a blanket?"

"A game." The eyes were less murky—not amused, but not particularly anxious either. "When she came to, I was going to tell her, 'There's a contract on you, you're a ripoff artist, and you ripped off the wrong guy.' That's what I'd say. And I'd look real fierce, like this—" he made bulging eyes and a brutally twisted mouth "—and take out my knife, rub it on my thumb, and say, 'Sorry, but this is it.' She'd be scared, but excited, too, to be in the middle of a real heavy scene. Underneath, she'd know I'd never really hurt her."

Weare looked at him in his steady way. Reese blew a sigh. "I guess it sounds crazy, but—well, that's how it was."

"Where did you get her?"

"At a dope party up near Skyline. She'd had a load and I thought I'd get her out before things got completely screwy. I got her in the car and asked where the van was. She said she didn't know but if we drove around we'd find it. That's what I was doing."

"With her taped up under the blanket."

"She'd passed out. I keep tape in the glovebox. I've played this game before three or four times—not on her but other girls. They're scared at first but at the end we're laughing at how shook up they were when it was just a game."

Weare didn't comment on Reese's sense of humor. "Where was the party?"

Reese shook his head.

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Weare asked for his car keys. Reese said they were in the switch of the LTD.

Weare asked the cop at the wheel to drive Reese to the Courthouse, and his partner to drive Reese's car to the Courthouse garage for deputies there to go over it for anything useful. He asked Dolan if he and his partner would take the girl to Chope Hospital to be checked and held overnight.

Twenty minutes later he was on the fourth floor of the Courthouse, checking Reese into jail on overnight hold. He turned in the Buck knife. Reese gave him a pleasant goodnight and was trotted away to be strip-searched, showered, given orange jail rompers, and tucked in.

Weare went down to the garage and was told that the search of the LTD had turned up nothing that looked useful. He looked over stuff from the trunk and under the seats and agreed that it might as well be chucked back in. He drove to San Carlos, made his turn on Howard, and half an hour later, a little past 1:00, he was asleep.

At 8:30 A.M. he was at Chope, on the third-floor jail ward. A nurse told him, "She's okay. She didn't take as much as they first thought." She led him to a 6 × 10′ nothing-colored room with a screened window, a bed with a folded blanket and a pillow, a chair, and a toilet. Gale or whoever perched on the bed in jeans, plaid shirt, and worn sandals, her brown hair brushed, small face clean, looking at an old *People*. She put it down and blue eyes a lot less shiny than last night looked him over. He took the chair and said who he was, and who was she?

"Am I busted for something?"

"Do you remember last night?"

"Not particularly."

He told her when and where he had discovered her last night, taped and blanketed. She was quiet a while, then shrugged. "It's all a jumble."

"Did Reese tape you up?"

"Is that what he says?"

"Where did you get the dope?"

"I dunno. Somebody gave to me, I guess."

"Were you at a party?"

"Could be. There's lots of parties."

"What do you think of Reese taping you up, throwing a blanket on you?"

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"Somebody told me he did that to her once for a joke. He does weird things."

"What's your name?"

"Gale Winfield." Which could be true or a lie, as could further information he got—that she was seventeen, from Modesto, an orphan who had lived with an aunt named Ann Woods until two years ago when she had split to find out what life was like. She didn't remember the Modesto address, Aunt Ann didn't have a phone. Weare didn't push—his interest was last night. "Are you a ripoff artist?"

"Is that what Frank said?"

"Are you?"

"Now and then."

"What's the most you've ripped off?"

"Once I got a guy for about a hundred dollars' worth of crank."

"Recently?"

"Kind of."

"Who was he?"

"I dunno. Never saw him again."

A young guy new on the scene might take it hard, being foxed by a small, slight girl—might consider it an insult he should do something about, else be put down as a nobody, a wimp. He might hear about a burly, bearded dude with a sawed-off shotgun rumored to take care of ripoff artists for a prices.

Weare rambled around with that notion for a few minutes. The girl fiddled with her lip, looking thoughtful "If someone hired Frank to off me, he'd have been driving toward the coast, or into the hills—not north on El Camino at Belmont, like you said."

"Sometimes bodies are found in the Sierras. Nobody ever finds who they were, or where from." Somestimes bodies were found on beaches on the San Mateo coastside.

The girl was quiet. He asked, "Did Reese give you the dope?"

"All I know about last night is what you tell me, that you found me taped up and I started babbling about frogs and swans."

"I didn't say anything about frogs or swans."

She mumbled, "No? I thought you did. I guess it was a thought floating around in my head."

Weare guessed that last night she had been stalling until she could work things out, decide the best line to take—which seemed to be that she remembered nothing. He asked again if Reese had been her dope source. She got a tight mouth. "What difference does

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it make what I say? He'll walk anyway, you know that. You cops never get anything solid on him. Maybe you don't try too hard. Why should I stick my neck out, get him down on me?"

"He is already."

"You don't know that."She said sulkily, "Get him on your own if you want him. I doubt you do. If he went to prison, who would you have to play your cop games on?"

Weare said they might put an ad in the paper and left.

He told the nurse he'd like to have the girl held seventy-two hours. In that time he'd try to run down some info, find out if there was an Aunt Ann, and if she wanted her back and could handle her. If not, he'd turn her over to a juvenile officer, to get her into a halfway house or a treatment center or somewhere.

He liked her. He remembered the bright line of baloney she had handed him last night. Where had she picked up on an old poem like 'Ben Bolt'? Probably a reader, high IQ, good marks in school before discovering the wonders of dope; heading out to find out about life. Or death. Or TV.

He went to the Sheriff's Office, third floor Courthouse, and got word from a deputy to call Milt Josten at the D.A.'s office. He crossed the hall and Josen asked what he had on Frank Reese. He told him.

Josten sighed. "Not this time, then."

Weare called the jail and said to cut Reese loose, adding, "Tell him I'll be in the basement restaurant."

He sat at a far table with coffee. Reese strolled in, looked around, spotted him, got coffee, and ambled over. "Morning, Mr. Weare." He patted his hip. "They gave me my knife back." Weare hadn't thought they wouldn't—it was his, and more or less legal.

"What di you want to talk about?" He slouched at ease across the table.

"Your first ticket in five years, you said." Reese nodded, gave him a slice of wry through the bear. "Poor time to get one." Reese said anytime was a poor time. It would cost him forty dollars.

Weare said, "Five miles north of CooCoo's is the bridge turn. Cross the bridge and 80 East goes toward the Sierras."

Reese looked puzzled. "So?"

"The cop stopped you. I got involved, Gale went to Chope, you went to jail—nobody went to the Sierras."

Reese scratched his beard. "What about the Sierras?"

"I'm just improvising. This is a scene in your TV show. You're just

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out of jail, we're having coffee, I'm asking some roundabout cop questions—okay?"

Reese shrugged a hand.

"What if last night you hadn't been stopped, had kept driving, no plan, just a feeling that the game was expanding? You don't know why, but you feel excitement, like maybe something big is going to happen. You've crossed the bridge and you're on 80 East. A while later it's the mountains, darkness, steep cliffs—nobody but you with your knife and little Gale taped up in back."

Reese licked hi lips and watched Weare witheyes that had got somewhat cloudy.

"Suddenly you know why you've come. The three or four other times you played this game were rehearsals, dry-runs for tonight. This is the night you're going to find out the hard and bloody way if you have inside you what it takes to be a real-life star."

The clouds were darker. Weare said mildly, "I'm improvising is all."

Reese's voice was thick. "This is crazy."

"What is?"

"What you're hinting. It was a game. All right, a sick game—I won't play it again. But that's all. It wasn't going to turn into anything vicious."

Weare said, "A power game. Manson played power games. So did a guy named Leopold and his friend Loeb. Sometimes without realizing it, the guy loses control, the game takes charge. One move on the board—the game says make it. The guy makes it."

He let that hang a half minute, sipping coffee and gazing at the cloudy eyes. Then, "Near CooCoo's, did you feel you were starting to lose control? Did you say, I've got to stop this, now!—and cut in front of the cop?"

"You're saying I did it on purpose?"

"Asking."

Reese muttered, "I never say him. I don't think I saw him."

Weare got up. Reese held up a hand and Weare waited. Reese said, "If you hadn't showed up he'd have ticketed me, let me go—what then? What about the game then?"

"I don't know. Maybe you'd have been back in control. Or maybe the game would have gone on to wherever it was going—Sierras, maybe?"

Reese said slowly, "You're a scary guy, Mr. Weare."

"Am I? Or is that just a good line to finish this scene?"

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He gave a farewell knock on the table, walked to the elevators, didn't look back.

A couple of minutes later, he was at his desk, going over the scene. Maybe Reese had got a ticke on purpose. Or maybe he'd never seen the cruiser.

Maybe if the cop and then Weare hadn't got involved, the game would have played itself out a few miles from the Nut Haven, Reese stripping the tape from Gale and the two having some laughs about hos shook-up she'd been.

Or maybe it would have carried on into the Sierras or some other remote place and ended with Gale's remains left there, and Reese, blooded, ont he threshold of the career he'd maybe always yearned for—a real-life bad dude, a killer for pay.

If that wasn't already his career.

Maybe, maybe, maybe—Weare gave a low moan. He was sick of Reese, of himself—questions, more questions, footless speculations, no answers. He knew no more about Reese now than he had two months ago in the donut shop.

Instead of the unerring detective in *Dial M,* he was the inept detective in *The Frank Reese Show,* if that's what it was.

He told his mind to drop Reese. His mind complied, chanting dopily, "Father was a lizard, we lost him in a blizzard."

That gave him a little lift and a smile, both welcome. He'd stop stewing about Reese, pick up the problem of Gale.

He needed background facts, meaning another talk with her. She might balk, probably would—but at worst he'd pick up some hints he could work with.

Ten minutes later he was on the freeway northbound, feeling better, remembering how last night had started, with him keying on Reese's fixed look in the side miror, and following up. If he hadn't, how would the night have ended?

He didn't know. But one thing he knew—the small, brown-haired girl, Gale or whoever, was at Chope right now, not elsewhere.

Did that make him not completely inept?

Maybe.

"Q"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Have we met?" she asked. "You could be an acquaintance and I wouldn't know."

"Afraid not." Tony introduced himself. "My partner and I are working on that house across the road. Converting it into flats. We saw you walk by and took an interest."

She closed her eyes and slumped against the wall. "Forgive me," she said. "These blackouts leave me weak."

Tony Logan and his partner Ernie Colman, two of William Bankier's spontaneous people. William Bankier's "Dead Women Sell No Tales" (EQMM, November 1984) was rated the best mystery short story published in 1984 by Marvin Lachman in The Mystery Fancier. *He called the story "the culmination of almost two decades of remarkably consistent performance on the part of Mr. Bankier, a wonderful combination of sophistication and surprise . . ."*

THE REACTION OF THE WORKING CLASS

by WILLIAM BANKIER

She strode along the King's Road in knee-high oxblood boots, denim trousers tucked in, satin baseball jacket sporting a number on the sleeve, her hair streaked gunmetal to shoulder length, her big face vacant as she turned her eyes to the traffic. Tony Logan set down the bricks he was holding and stopped pretending he was doing anything else but watching her pass by.

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"Take a look at that," Logan said to Ernie Colman, who was mixing cement on a sheet of plywood.

Ernie gave the girl his blue-eyed assessment. "She's not all there," was his comment.

"Notice the way she looks only at bus drivers and guys in lorries. She's checking the reaction of the working class."

"Better invite her to the meeting, then," Colman said.

Logan left the building site and ran after her in plaster-patterned trousers and broken boots. He stood just behind her at an intersection waiting for the light to change. He heard a humming sound coming from her—not a tune, only random notes. The head turned slowly from side to side, observing the occupants of passing vehicles and people walking by. Her smile was transient, like sunlight on a day of patchy cloud.

The light changed, and when she stepped forward her boot missed the curb, giving Logan an opportunity to take her arm. "Nearly a nasty accident," he said.

"Sorry, I'm not concentrating."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm not sure."

"Stand over here, out of the flow." He guided her into a doorway. "Been in the pub?"

"I wish it were only that." She showed him the face of a troubled child. "I can't remember who I am."

"Have you got identification in your handbag?"

"Yes, but that isn't the point. I can look and discover who I am and where I live. I want to know without doing that." She drew herself up. "Have we met? You could be an acquaintance and I wouldn't know."

"Afraid not. My name is Tony Logan. My partner and I are working on that house across the road. Converting it into flats. We saw you walk by and took an interest."

She closed her eyes and slumped against the wall. "Forgive me," she said. "These blackouts leave me weak."

"You need a sit-down and a cup of tea." Logan took her arm again. "Come along, we have a kettle on the site."

They sat on salvaged chairs in a small garden behind the house, under the shade of a pear tree that would survive the modeling. Colman acted as "mother," pouring boiling water onto teabags in massive crockery mugs. Logan passed the ginger cake.

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"I've remembered my name," she said. "I'm Nora Packer."

"I wonder," Colman said, "if Nora Packer would like to attend our meeting."

"Might be the best thing for her," Logan said. "Drinks and conversation with convivial strangers. Nobody knows who anybody is at the Broken Bell. Amnesia anonymous."

"I am *Mrs.* Nora Packer."

"I have a wife and four children," Colman excused himself.

Logan said, "I have an American girl friend who treats me like a husband. We're all safe as houses."

The shattered house beside them chose that moment to shed a couple of slates from its roof. As the dust settled, everybody laughed. "I like a building with a sense of humor," Nora said. "What's this Broken Bell?"

The public house derived its name from an emasculated brass bell hanging behind the bar. Its clapper had been removed by the previous landlord, who decided to defy the drinking laws by refusing to signal the legal closing hour of eleven o'clock at night. He got away with it for a while, then he paid a few fines and finally was stripped of his license. The new owner obeyed the rules, but the broken bell was retained as a conversation piece. Eventually it took over from the predictable Rose and Crown as a more original name for the pub.

Colman brought drinks to the arrangement of tables pushed together where Logan was sitting close to Nora in a crowd that included Max, the unemployed actor, Neville, the alcoholic ex-journalist who was surviving currently on one of the houseboats beside Battersea Bridge, Tilly from the greengrocer's shop next door to the pub, and Gabe, the punk beautician from the King's Road, with her fluorescent hair and her face made up in white and red like a pantomime mask. Others came and went like the gulls that flickered beyond the wall of windows facing the river, and conversation surged in tides of argument and laughter.

"You were crazy to give up the Doctor Dillon series, Max," Neville scolded. "You worked every week—you were seen on every television screen in Britain."

"Hindsight," the mournful actor replied. His famous eyes rolled in a face drawn down with boredom and alcohol. "I wanted to escape being typecast. Now, God help me, I'm seldom cast at all."

Gabe was framing Nora Packer's face with nervous hands, her

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eyes squinting through smoke from a cigarette clenched between her teeth. "Your hair is mad for me to shape it forward."

"Never mind," Neville droned on, "we're all sinking here. If only a publisher would accept my book, I could get back to work. I can't go and see my friends at the paper. They ask me how the novel is going. Good lord, four years—" He produced the shy smile of a schoolboy.

The landlord approached, his arms lined with plates. "Egg and chips," he recited, "steak and chips, shepherd's pie and chips, bacon sandwich and chips—" The meals were claimed and the perpetual rotation to and from the bar for drinks went on.

"I'm not sure what he'll say," Nora said to Logan and Colman, the three of them withdrawn into a private conversation. "My husband is an unpredictable man."

"A powerful man," Logan warned. "When you said Packer, I thought right away of the Reginald Packer who writes the column for *Reflections Magazine* and does those talks on Metro Radio."

"Tony's girl friend," Colman said, "the American woman he mentioned, works for *Reflections*. Her name is Valerie Land. She keeps wanting him to move with her to New York."

"Go," Nora said fervently. "Escape. I almost made it once, all the way to Montreal, before they caught me and brought me back."

"There speaks an unhappy person."

"So unhappy my mind shuts off every now and then. One of these days, I may not come back." She gave the dusty builders a wistful look as they leaned close, attending on her words.

"What happened, Nora?" Logan asked. When she hesitated, he said, "This is the place for the truth. And the time."

"I got pregnant," she said. "Not by my husband. Reg was not pleased, but he seemed to have a civilized solution to the problem. He has connections in Montreal from years ago. I was sent there to have the baby because he refused to claim it as his own and I said no to an abortion. The idea was that I would settle down and start raising my child there. He would work out his contracts here and join me in Montreal in a year or so to begin a second career."

"Obviously, none of that happened."

"Some of it did. I had the baby, but she was taken from me immediately and given away for adoption—I never even held my daughter. The shock wasn't like anything I've experienced. I still have these blackouts. I flew back to London to try and persuade Reg to honor his promise. When I saw he never would, I returned to

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Montreal—the escape I mentioned—and tried to get Doctor Monteith to put me in touch with my daughter, to get her back. Reg must have given him a lot of money—he refused even to see me. My husband sent a detective. I think the amnesia may have taken over—anyway, when I woke up I was back in London." She picked up her glass and set it down without drinking. "And here I am."

Colman's wife appeared, along with his oldest son—a carbon copy of his father. Rangy build, sky-blue eyes. She was impressively fat and as beautiful as a black-forest gateau. "Caught you with another woman," she said.

After introductions, Colman said, "Nora is married to a very unkind man. We've been hearing."

"She needs a friend," Logan told her.

"She's found two of them," Colman said.

Half an hour later, he and his wife and son were off to do things with the barbecue behind his house in Hammersmith. "You have my permission to sort the bastard out," he instructed Logan. "But save a piece for me."

"Nobody can do anything against Reginald Packer," Nora said.

"Don't be too sure," Colman told her. "You're in with a whole different class of guy."

When his partner was gone, Logan said, "What about the father, the man who got you pregnant? Wasn't he able to help?"

"I never even told him. He doesn't know I had the baby."

"Does that make sense?"

"I thought it did at the time. Maybe it doesn't. It was a very sudden affair and it was over almost before it started. I met Martin at a class I used to attend for keeping fit. He was our celebrity guest one night."

"Have I heard of him?"

"I'm sure you have. Martin Whittaker, the marathon runner."

Logan finished his drink and looked at his watch. "First things first," he said. "You and I are going to run after Whittaker and put him in the picture."

"I do this for therapy," Whittaker said, using white on a thin brush to touch highlights on his still life of fruit in a crystal bowl. "It helps me fight the depression. Fortunately, I'm a better runner than I am a painter."

As if they had come to attend his vernissage, Whittaker had supplied Nora and Logan with glasses of sherry. "Remember the first

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time I showed up at your movement class, Norie?" he said as he refilled their glasses.

"I remember," she said, glancing at Logan.

"You've never believed how scared I was."

"To me you seemed all confidence."

"Talking to strange ladies—I was more petrified than I've ever been setting out on a road race." He dunked his brush in turps and dried it on a rag. "Time for me to exercise my injury. Come next door and I'll show you what I purchased with my Sports Council grant."

They followed him from his studio into a room half the size, where one corner was occupied by a machine of chrome bars and springs and iron weights. "I'm trying to get over a back injury that includes a pinched sciatic nerve. I don't mean to sound heroic, but for some months I've been running with pain." He lay down on a ramp which was part of the machine and which accepted his head at a level below his feet. He inserted his ankles under a weighted bar. With hands locked behind his neck, he began a series of situps.

"Will you be all right for the London Marathon next month?" Logan asked.

"I'm not sure. At the moment it's touch and go. I'd like to be the first man to win it two years in a row." Whittaker changed his position and began raising and lowering weights on his shoulders. "I'd also like to be selected to run for England in the Olympics. It all depends on getting fit again."

Logan was the one to broach the important subject. "Nora has a project, too," he said. "You'd better tell him."

"I've kept it a secret till now, Martin," she said.

He was climbing into tracksuit trousers, his lean legs ivory-smooth. "Is it about the baby?"

"How do you know? I never told you!"

"I've known since before you left for Montreal the first time. I think you were in your seventh month."

The life drained out of her. "Oh, God. Reg. It must have been Reg."

"We had a conversation in a bar. Neutral ground, he called it. There was some kind of noxious drink. He described the whole situation to me, how it was impossible for Reginald Packer's wife to have somebody else's baby here in London where the word would get around. But you could have it someplace else and leave it there. It was Montreal?"

"She's living there today. Your daughter."

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"Montreal is tough for road-racing. Too many hills."

Logan said, "Are you hearing what the woman is telling you?"

"I'm not totally callous. She never even told me she was pregnant. I heard it from Reg. He offered to set me up with this training equipment, and funds enough to make me independent, like the Eastern Bloc athletes. All I had to do was forget about Nora Packer and my illegitimate child." He began bending to touch the opposite toe, legs apart, torso and arms swinging rhythmically. "If it is, in fact, my child."

Logan made a move, but Nora caught his shoulder and drew him away. "I won't get any help here," she said. "Nobody home."

Outside, looking for a taxi, she said, "I should have known. Reg would cover all the bases—especially the father."

"How did he find out it was Whittaker if you didn't tell him?"

"He's gotten hold of rarer information than that."

A cab slowed and stopped. Logan opened the door: "Will you let me talk to him?"

Nora's response was to give the driver her home address. As the cab pulled into traffic, she said, "All right, come and complete your education. Learn what it feels like to talk to a charming stone wall."

They went from room to room of the Packer Mayfair penthouse without locating the owner. Nobody home here, either. There was a note on the pine chopping block in the kitchen, held in place by a half full bottle. Nora read the message aloud: "I assume from today's absence you've been on one of your mystery tours. The good news is I'm at Metro, recording three special programs for the station anniversary. Money money. Drink your medicine and get to bed."

"Very nice," Logan said. "Not many people can be sarcastic with a whiskey bottle."

She glanced at her watch. "We could probably catch him at the radio station. Will you come with me?"

Nora wheeled a sinister Porsche from some cave behind the building, and when it turned out of the laneway Logan got in beside her. "Now you look more at home," he said.

"There's still time for you to back out."

"I'm not bothered. If Packer gives me any difficulty, I'll call in my large friend Colman."

As they drove up Park Lane and turned past Marble Arch, heading for the broadcasting center in Euston, he asked her, "How did you ever end up married to such a sadistic bastard?"

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"It was fun at first. He can be charming. I was working as a barmaid in the Crossed Keys and Reg came in one Saturday morning, making everyone laugh and buying drinks for the house. He waited for me after closing and it grew from there."

"I don't picture you working in a pub."

"I quit Kenlow School with a year to go before graduation. Trouble at home." She decided to tell him about it as she waited for a traffic light to change. "My father was a successful stockbroker in the City. We lived in Surbiton at the time. He got involved in some sort of manipulation—it must have been evil for that lot to investigate his affairs. Anyway, they did. Daddy thwarted justice by overdosing with drugs and alcohol." The car raced away from the intersection like a dragster. "We were supposed to go to Brighton the following weekend."

"So you quit school and went into the drinking trade."

"Not immediately. I had a little money so I bummed around Chelsea for a year, staying with friends in a squat. Then I met Martin Whittaker and moved in with him. He needed help with the rent so I took the barmaid job. Shortly thereafter, Reginald Packer made his entrance."

They drove the rest of the way to the studio in silence, Logan catching glimpses of the hard pretty face frowning through the windshield, the daughter cheated out of her weekend in Brighton by a man who had put himself permanently out of her reach.

Packer had completed the recording session and was standing in a tape-editing room making the engineers laugh. He was slim as a teenager, dressed in pearl-grey slacks and white cashmere sweater over a black shirt open at the neck. His grey hair was brushed in thick waves around the tanned, handsome face.

"Norie! What a lovely surprise. Who's this? Mr. Logan, how are you?" He led them out of the room and down a flight of stairs to reception. "Come for a drink. I have a feeling you've rescued my wife."

Now that they were with the great man, Nora had gone silent. They went next door to a hotel bar, where Packer set them up with some special cocktail he claimed to have invented. Logan waited for the lady to open the subject of the missing daughter, but she kept her head down and sipped her drink like a little girl allowed to stay downstairs with the grown-ups as long as she behaved herself.

At last, driven more by curiosity than anything else, Logan said,

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"Mr. Packer, with respect, I have to ask you something. Nora has been telling me about the daughter she had a few years ago. You sent her to Montreal to have it because it wasn't yours."

Far from being annoyed, Packer seemed entertained. "Is that how she's telling it? Poor man, I hope you haven't let your emotions be too harrowed by this tale of sorrow. It isn't true. Not a word of it."

Logan stared at the top of Nora's head centered over the empty cocktail glass. "She had no baby?"

"False pregnancy. There's been more than one. I keep hoping we can manage a son and heir before this old geezer loses his powers."

Logan finished his drink and refused another. He wanted to go home and forget about this wild-goose chase. The Packers left the bar with him. He turned down Packer's offer of a lift and looked for a taxi. As he stood by the curb, Nora left her husband and came to his side. "Thank you," he said, "for an interesting day."

"Do you believe him?"

"Don't start again."

She laughed softly. "I knew it. Plausible Reginald Packer, the man everybody accepts at face value." Her voice hardened. "What the hell did you *expect* him to say?"

Valerie Land wound the clock, set the alarm, and turned out the bedside light. She settled back her head mostly on Logan's pillow, an arm across his bare chest. He turned his face into the fragrant veil of her hair. "All the more reason," Val said, "for you to forget this crowd and come to New York with me. I know Reg Packer from editorial meetings. He can be dangerous."

"Has he given you trouble?"

"I keep out of his way. Listen, my boss took me to lunch today. They love my work here but the magazine is not making it. There will have to be cuts in staff before the winter. They sure as hell aren't going to drop Brits and keep a Yank."

"I suppose."

"They have a place for me in New York. But it won't remain open forever. In the next few weeks, I'm going to have to sing or get off the stage."

"I'm not sure I can make it without you." Then, because he felt like it, Logan let loose with a tavern baritone. "Val, Val, dear old pal . . ."

She shut him up with a breasty headlock and then they were

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engaged in that most beautiful of human activities, laughing in bed . . .

Ernie Colman appeared on the building site at half past eight with a bottle of milk, a bag of sweet buns, and a copy of one of the morning tabloids. Logan was standing in a daze staring at the wreckage of the house they were converting. Someday it would be reorganized into four smart apartments, everything neat and polished, tenants in place paying astronomical rents. Today it was impossible to see how that could ever happen.

With the kettle plugged in and beginning to murmur, Colman shook open the newspaper. "How about this then," he said. "We've lost our best marathon runner."

"Whittaker?"

"He shot himself. Left a note saying his injury was not responding to treatment. I guess he thought he could never run competitively again."

Logan looked at the photograph of a jubilant Martin Whittaker accepting the trophy last year for winning the London Marathon. "This is fishy."

"What do you mean?"

"Nora Packer took me to see this guy last night. He seemed confident to me, working out to get in shape for next month."

Colman was puzzled. He wanted to know what Nora had to do with the famous athlete and how Logan had come to meet him.

"After you left the pub with your family last night, she told me who got her pregnant. It was him—Whittaker. They were living together before she met Reg Packer. I wanted to help Nora, do something to bring her together with her baby. This guy hadn't even been told he was the father. I said let's bring him in on it, maybe he'll want to help."

"How did he react?"

"Less than enthusiastic. Not even willing to concede the baby was his. All he could think about was winning the marathon two years in a row." Logan returned the paper. "Now this so-called suicide."

They made their early tea and used it to wash down sweet buns as they stood in the ruins of the kitchen. "How do you read it, then?" Colman asked.

Logan said, "We went on to see Packer himself. Lucky me, I got inside Metro Radio where he was doing some recording. He told me none of what Nora says is true. There were only false pregnancies, never any baby. Her amnesia comes from this hysteria of hers."

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"Who do you believe?"

"Last night I was ready to believe Packer. A busy man with a neglected wife whose system will try anything to claim his attention. Now I'm not so sure. Whittaker said Packer gave him lots of money to leave Nora alone. He accepted it and the boat sailed on. Last night we made waves. Now it isn't just a quiet arrangement between three people, the Packers and Martin Whittaker. Now I know about it, maybe others as well. Whittaker becomes more than a receiver of hush-money. He becomes a witness to the fact that Nora is not a hysteric, that she really had a baby, that the estimable Reg Packer sent her away and had the infant kidnaped." Logan kicked the paper. "How the tabloids would love to get hold of *that* one."

"Sounds horribly plausible," Colman said.

"And I'm involved."

They went outside and resumed yesterday's work on the front wall. Sometime after ten o'clock, Colman tapped a brick in place with the end of his trowel and said, "Don't be involved, Tony."

"Nora has nobody else."

"Falling in love again . . ." The big builder crooned the line out of tune, the way Dietrich used to do it.

"Not really. But I got her to tell her story. I made her take me to see the marathoner. Without that, Whittaker would probably be clocking ten miles around Hyde Park this morning."

"Then go to the police."

"With a flimsy story like this? Against a solid citizen like Packer? They'd show me the door."

As he went on working, Colman said, "There's one thing you're forgetting. Let's assume Packer did kill Whittaker because he knew too much." He held his trowel like a pistol and aimed it at his friend. "You know as much as Whittaker did. What's going to happen to you?"

Two days later, Logan's telephone rang in the early evening. It was Nora. "I hope you don't mind this call."

"I'm glad to hear from you. I was wondering what was happening."

"A few things. Can you come out and meet me?"

She was in the hotel bar in Euston when he got there, at the same table where Packer had bought them his elaborate cocktails. Now they drank whiskey and water. "It's such a relief to be with you again." Her hand covered his. "I think he wants to kill me."

"Your husband?"

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"Or have me put away." Her eyes emptied and she stared vacantly at the glass in her hand. "I'd rather be dead."

"Are you sleeping all right? Have you seen a doctor?"

"Don't say doctor. That's part of what's happening. But let me tell you first about Martin. The police think he shot himself with a gun that was found in his hand. They haven't been able to trace the gun. And the so-called suicide note was typed. Anybody could have done that—and put the gun in his hand after he was dead."

"Where are you getting these details? I didn't see them in the newspaper."

"The police came to us because of Reg backing Martin financially. It was only a formality. They don't know Martin was the father of my child."

"Could they connect your husband with Whittaker's death?"

"The gun. For years Reg has kept a pistol in the bottom drawer of his desk. He got it somewhere illegally—it could never be traced. I looked the other day. The gun is gone."

"It would be your word against your husband's that it existed."

"That's why I've kept quiet so far. Anyway, the police seem convinced Martin killed himself. They say a physiotherapist confirms his back was not responding to treatment."

The waiter brought another round, for which Nora insisted on paying. "I haven't told you the worst," she said. "Dr. Monteith is in London."

"Who's he?"

"Clifford Monteith, the Montreal doctor who delivered my baby and then stole her from me."

"Is he a problem?"

"Monteith has been in my husband's pocket for years. That's how Reg was able to get him to go along with the plot. He has files on my behavior in Montreal after I gave birth. And he knows about my blackouts. I think he's going to certify me and have me put away."

"Can he do that?"

"You don't know Reginald Packer."

"Why would he want to?"

"Because I won't shut up about my daughter. I want her and I'm going to get her. The easiest way for Reg to get back to a peaceful life is for me to be committed. That or get rid of me the way he got rid of Martin."

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Logan finished his second drink faster than he wanted to. "Wheels within wheels," he said.

"Will you stay with me?" Nora asked. "You're the only person I can depend on."

She looked vulnerable and beautiful and Logan was proud to be asked. This quality lady—his own discovery on the King's Road only a week ago—was turning to him in her distress. She was Guinevere and he was no less than Lancelot and chivalry was not dead, not as long as he felt such a powerful urge to stand up and be counted. "I'll do whatever I can," he said.

"Thank you, Tony." She kissed his cheek so unexpectedly and so briefly that he would never be sure it had happened. "Let me make a telephone call. I'll arrange for us to go and have a word with Doctor Monteith."

Spending time with Clifford Monteith was like being backstage at a vaudeville show. A balding man in his fifties, he had the lean build, the lugubrious face, and the bewildered moves of a trained comic. Every time he turned, you expected him to be hit with a bucket of water.

"I didn't have to come here and face Reg Packer," he said. "I could have stepped out of the plane over the Atlantic." The hotel suite had several closed doors. Surely they would start opening soon and a French maid would dart through, chased by a man in his shirttails.

"Why did you come, then?" Nora asked.

Logan had accepted yet another drink and was feeling over his limit. "This girl is afraid of you, Dr. Monteith."

"Because of what I know. Yes, I can understand that. But Packer made me a promise three years ago and he hasn't begun to fulfill it. If it was only me, I'd probably be back in Montreal delivering babies. But Mindy thinks I should go for what's owed me."

"You've lost me," Logan said.

"Mindy is my wife. Lovely big Jewish girl from Winnipeg. Years ago her parents sent her east to Montreal because there weren't enough eligible boys of her persuasion in that small community. Montreal with its world-famous medical school and the remains of an early ghetto would be the happy hunting ground. Imagine the screaming back in Winnipeg when she fell for a goy. Gevalt! At least she married a doctor."

"I mean you and Reg Packer," Logan said. "Where's the connection between you two?"

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"The glorious old days," Monteith said, drifting about and topping up glasses from a bottle of scotch. Had it been a seltzer bottle, he might have sprayed the room. "I was a medical student. Reg was getting started in journalism, doing a column for the *Gazette*. Both of us worked three nights a week at the Top Hat Club doing comedy sketches on a little stage above the bar. Satirical stuff on local politics. Reg was also a calypso singer—did you know that, Nora? He played the guitar and wore a top hat and sang little verses about the news of the day. Lord Reggie, he called himself."

The telephone rang. Monteith answered and carried on his conversation, looking directly at Nora and Tony as if he was speaking to them and the phone was some sort of hearing aid. "Yes, they're here. All seems peaceful. No need for you to stay any longer. By all means, bring her in. See you soon." He put down the receiver. "They've been to see the lions in Trafalgar Square."

Nora said sharply, "Have you brought the child with you?"

"The better to persuade Reg he should pay. As he promised years ago." Monteith opened one of the doors. It led into a bathroom. "Talk to each other," he said as he closed the door behind him.

"I don't get this," Logan said. "You told me he was here to have you put away. That he and Reg were in it together."

She opened her handbag and took out a pistol. She handed it to Logan. He accepted it unwillingly. "What's this?"

"The gun from Reg's desk. I told you about it."

"You said it was missing. What the hell is going on, Nora?"

"You promised to help me."

"I can't if you won't level."

"Monteith has to be got rid of. And you're the man. You won't regret it, Tony, I promise you. Things can be lovely between you and me once he's out of the way. Reg won't mind, he's hardly ever around."

"The way he didn't mind about Whittaker?"

The bathroom door opened. Monteith stepped into the room, saw the gun in Logan's hand, and did a reaction loaded with enough astonishment to reach the back of the second balcony. "Who's that intended for?"

"Now," Nora commanded. "Do it now."

Logan understood almost everything in a flash. Thinking he had gone after Nora in the street, it was she who had selected him. It explained the provocative walk and the eyes focusing on working men. She was searching for the kind of hero who would swallow her

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story and do this killing for her. She knew a working-class man would make the ideal patsy—his reaction would be to come racing to the aid of the princess in danger. He looked at the doctor and began to say, "Have you any idea what she—"

Nora came to him fast, grabbed his arm and raised it, pointing the gun at Monteith. Logan resisted and was surprised at the woman's strength. Her fist was closing on his gun hand, exerting pressure on the trigger finger. He managed to turn his arm enough so that the gun was no longer aimed at Monteith. "Let go," he said. "Let go of the gun!" It went off. Nora sank to the floor.

"Crazy," was all Logan could say. "She must be crazy."

Monteith knelt beside her, examined her. "And dead." He got to his feet. "You aren't wrong about her. If she couldn't have me killed, she was ready to settle for herself."

The door from the corridor opened and two people came into the room. "This is my wife, Mindy," he said. He got between her and the child and the body on the floor. "Better go into the bedroom," he told his wife, "there's been an accident."

Logan caught only a glimpse of the little girl as she was ushered through, but it was enough to see that she was one of the most beautiful of mixed-race children, pale hair drawn back in braids from an exotic African race.

When the police had been and gone, taking the body of Nora Packer with them, Logan said, "So now we have an orphan asleep in the other room."

"She doesn't know Nora was her mother," Mindy said. "We've told her she's adopted. She doesn't fully understand what it means, except that she was chosen because we love her."

"Whittaker wasn't the father," Logan said. "I'm still confused."

"Nora went with a lot of men," Monteith explained. "The father was another athlete, a friend of the marathon runner. When she realized she was pregnant, Nora told Reg she was going to have a baby with the wrong color skin. Reg had never been too bothered by her exploits as long as there was no publicity. So they arranged for her to come to Montreal, have the child at my clinic, and leave it with me."

"So all that business about a stolen child and Nora's blackouts was nonsense," Logan said.

"Yes. She told lies the way the rest of us discuss the weather. Her aim—Packer's aim, too—was to get somebody to knock me off."

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"Why?"

"Because I wrote Reg a letter and told him that unless he paid me the money he promised, I was going to introduce Nora's interesting daughter into London society. It was only a threat, we would never have done it."

"What was the money he promised?"

"Fifty grand for me to expand my clinic. Doctors are supposed to have all the money in the world, but I've never raked it in."

"He treats people who can't pay," Mindy said, frowning at her husband under magnificent eyebrows and putting an arm across his shoulders. "Schmuck."

"When Nora was in trouble, he promised me the money. After I'd taken care of it, he forgot. I've been writing him letters for three years."

Logan discovered a new bruise on his hand. It must have been made by the trigger guard as Nora tried to control the gun. "According to the police, Whittaker's suicide was real. His injury meant he couldn't run, and he was hooked on morphine. Poor bastard. Nora tried to make it sound as if Reg had killed him. Why do that?"

"To earn more sympathy? Who could say with Nora? The event took place, so she used it."

In the morning, Logan showed up late at the building site. "Thanks for coming around," Colman said.

"I was in a terrible hassle last night," Logan said. He took his friend through the story. At the end, he said, "I'll have to attend the inquest since I held the gun that killed her. But Monteith's testimony puts me in the clear."

"What about Reg Packer?" Colman asked. "What happens to him?"

"Nothing. We'll never know whether killing Monteith was only Nora's idea or whether he was in on the plan."

Around three in the afternoon, when the men were sorting good brick from damaged brick in the front yard, a convertible rolled to a stop outside and refused to start up again. A girl with crew-cut red hair and leopard eyes got out, raised the hood, and looked inside at the engine without much comprehension. When she turned and faced the men behind the low stone wall, Ernie Colman spoke without being spoken to. "Sorry, lady," he said, "we only fix buildings."

"Amen," Logan murmured. He was wondering if a trip to New York with Valerie Land might change his luck.

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a *NEW* Brownstone story by

JEAN DARLING

Forty years ago, we celebrated the end of World War II, ten years ago the end of the Vietnam War. These next two stories, the first about Sadie Gold and her Manhattan residence for actresses, the second set in Saigon, are postwar stories that remind us that evil characters will continue to operate beyond any truce . . .

1944 DIARY

by JEAN DARLING

The thought that she should have a word with Beth Downey crossed Sadie's mind several times that particular week in August 1949, but The Brownstone on West Forty-sixth Street was overrun with painters and the fifth-floor plumbing went berserk at the same time the air-conditioning in the basement practice rooms decided to pack it in. These, combined with the normal everyday problems inherent in running a boarding house that catered to thirty aspiring stars of Broadway and points west, kept Sadie Gold on the hop. When at last she was blessed with a free moment to take the girl to one side, it was too late. Elizabeth Downey was dead. Somehow she had managed to lose her footing in the subway and fallen into the path of an oncoming train.

It being rush hour at Times Square, everyone on the platform had been blinded by the homing instinct—no witnesses, no evidence of foul play. Reporters camped hopefully outside The Brownstone for a few days, then silently stole away.

Beth's belongings were taken up to the top-floor storeroom. A pall hung over the boarding house until she was formally laid to rest, then the morning after the funeral the first name on the waiting list was transferred to the Residents Book and life returned to nor-

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mal. For everyone except Elizabeth Downey's roommate, Marilu Jennings—and Sadie Gold.

Sadie wished she could shake off the feeling that she had failed the young blonde soprano. Having noticed the girl was as jumpy as a cat in a thorn tree, she should have made time for her. One of her basic rules was to steer clear of involvement with her boarders' problems, personal or otherwise, but this didn't mean that her door was locked to any girl who might need a temporary shoulder to cry on. Beth had known this as well as anyone. Why hadn't she come to her?

A soft knock sounded on Sadie's door. The big woman glanced up from her book at the ormolu clock on the marble mantelpiece: it was almost 1:00 A.M. "Come in," she said, not moving from the chaise longue Zeigfeld had given her when she left the Follies to marry Isaac Gold.

Marilu Jennings poked her head in at the door. She was wearing a blue chenille robe. "I'm sorry, Sadie, I know it's late—"

"It's all right. Sit down."

Marilu sat on a red-velvet chair by the chaise. "I don't think it was an accident like they say," she blurted out.

"It's a kinder verdict than suicide," said Sadie. "But what could have been so awful that she'd kill herself?"

"She didn't. I'd bet my life on it."

"How can you be so sure? Did she tell *you* why she was so miserable this past week?"

"No—she never confided in me, you know that." It was true. The roommates hadn't been the best of friends. Marilu had been jealous of Beth, who listed *Bloomer Girl* and *Annie Get Your Gun* among her credits. Beth had always been fortunate. She was hired for one singing chorus after another—then, when her fiancé Carter Harris opened a makeshift theater off Broadway, she was given star billing as the intermission vocalist.

"I thought you might know something," Marilu said. "It's true we weren't close, but I admired her. I can't let whoever was responsible get away with it."

Sadie watched her with troubled eyes. "Good luck, dear girl. I'll help if I can, but I wouldn't know where to start. I'm not sure *you* should start."

For half an hour Marilu watched the first act of *East Lynne* from the wings. The Irving Place loft Carter Harris had converted into

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the little goldmine called The Naughty Nineties was packed to the gunwales with an audience eager to pay ten dollars a head for the privilege of perching on the bare boards of a five-tier grandstand, where, dining on beer and sandwiches, they hissed the villain and cheered the hero soundly.

Between the first and second acts, she followed Carter around as he changed the scenery.

"Do you have any idea what was bothering Beth?" she asked him.

"*Was* something bothering her?" he said, his tiny features bunched around a wisp of a moustache. He was miles away, observing the look of the stage. He had always been an insensitive clod as far as Marilu was concerned.

During a two-hour break between modeling sessions, Marilu dropped by the Palace Theater Building to see Beth's agent, Max Seneca. "How's the next Margaret Sullavan?" the compact man greeted her from the ping-pong table that practically filled his office wall to wall. He noted the hatbox she was carrying. "Still modeling. Put down that badge of your profession and share my pastrami on rye."

Marilu shook her head.

"Thanks anyway, Max. I just stopped by to ask you about Beth." She asked and he talked, but he proved to be no more aware of Beth's state of mind before her death than Carter Harris or Sadie Gold.

At dinner at The Brownstone the following evening, Marilu was brought up short by Natalie Norris. The dancer was sitting at their table for six, listening to Marilu natter on about Beth's strangeness the last week of her life. "You're getting to be such a pain about Beth Downey, Marilu. Why can't you shut up? You'd think you were the only one upset by her death. She's *gone*—leave her be!" All through the dining room, girls looked up from scripts, musical scores, and paperbacks, then back in embarrassment. Until that moment Marilu hadn't realized how obsessed she had become.

Back in her room, she wondered if she should stop puzzling about Beth Downey's death. The other girls in The Brownstone seemed to have forgotten her—including those now charging from floor to floor, borrowing each other's clothes for the weekend. When you lived under Sadie Gold's roof, your clothes could automatically become part of a clothes pool to be requisitioned for auditions, photographic sessions, or heavy dates.

Marilu's door opened wide enough to admit a mudpack, topped by

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a scarf knotted Aunt Jemima style over a headful of wave clips and pincurls. "Can I borrow your red dress?" the apparition asked.

Marilu looked up from the copy of *Dear Brutus* she was trying to study. "Andrea beat you to it. I don't have a thread left."

After two more interruptions from prospective borrowers, Marilu got out of bed, hung a Do Not Disturb sign on the outside doorknob, and exchanged *Dear Brutus* for a paperback mystery—one of a half dozen on the shelf above her bed with Stanislavski and Shaw.

Across the room, an identical shelf, now a rat's nest of soiled underwear, garter belts, and stockings belonging to the new girl (who was home in Connecticut for the weekend) had supported a neat row of books when Beth had been alive. The diaries! Marilu thought, remembering the hours Beth had spent writing in one or another of them in the two years they had shared the room. There had been an even dozen, bound in maroon leather with *Diary* imprinted in gold on the spine. They dated from 1938 to 1949.

Marilu scrambled into her robe and padded barefoot down to the front hall, where lettered mailboxes and a key rack were set in the wall behind the high teak desk near the front door. Lily Bird, one-time soubrette, lounged on a straight-backed chair, ready to give change for the two pay phones on the landing above and keep all unauthorized males from crossing authorized boundary lines.

"Is it all right if I take the storeroom key for a minute, Lily?" Marilu asked the now plump, grey-haired woman.

"Patsy Fisher has it. She's up there now," Lily told her. "Don't forget to bring it back."

On reaching the top floor, Marilu found the storeroom door wide open. The key was in the lock and the light was on, but Patsy Fisher was nowhere to be seen. Par for the course, Marilu thought. Patsy was a scatterbrained little blonde who never listened to a word anyone said except when a possible job was involved.

Although less than a week had passed since Beth's three suitcases had been placed on top of Sadie's old Follies trunk, they were already covered with a faint film of dust. Amazed by her own affrontery, Marilu was relieved to find the diaries in the very first case she opened.

With her bed pulled away from the wall to catch any vagrant breeze through the window, Marilu glanced through several of the diaries, noting that in each one the last section, though headed Notes and Addresses, had been used instead as a date book and monthly accounts were summed up on the two end pages.

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Deciding that the sensible thing would be to read the entries made on the last few days of Beth's life, Marilu reached first for the 1949 diary. Each page accommodated two days. A gold ribbon lay between the pages dated July 30 and 31 and August 1 and 2. Both pages were covered with Beth's neat southpaw script in purple ink. The single entry read:

"It's him, I know it is. At first I didn't recognize him because he was wearing dark glasses—the kind with lenses like mirrors. He kept them on even after he closed the draperies to keep the sun out. When he told me he'd be in touch with Max, I left. Only when I got to the door I saw I'd forgotten my gloves, the lacy white ones, so I went back.

"He was talking on the phone with his back to me, so I didn't say anything—just picked up the gloves. But I must have made some noise because he swung around to face me. This time he wasn't wearing the glasses and when I saw his eyes I thought I'd die on the spot. It was the same man, I'm certain. I saw those pale eyes with the tiny black pupils only that one time, but there is no forgetting them ever. Somehow I managed to explain about having left my gloves and said goodbye. He didn't try to prevent me from leaving so I suppose he didn't recognize me. I pray to God he didn't."

There was a space, then the writing continued:

"I thought of going to the police, but what could I tell them that would make any sense after so long? I'll just have to live with things as they are and trust to luck."

That was all. The rest of the diary was blank except for the pages in the back.

Marilu's first impulse was to show the diary to Sadie. She was halfway to the stairs before she realized there was nothing to show anyone. The fact that seeing a man with pale eyes had frightened Beth Downey was meaningless unless the circumstances in which she first had seen the pale-eyed man were known. Even then there might not be much to go on unless a name was mentioned. Marilu retraced her steps. She would have to go through the diaries until she found the man—if she did.

Reading back through the years, she found nothing about a man with pale eyes in the rest of 1949, in 1948, 1947, 1946, or 1945. By then it was almost two A.M. and she was sleepy and discouraged. She turned out the light and fell into a troubled sleep.

The first thing she saw in the morning was the unread diaries.

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She had no plans, but she needed to get out, take a walk along the semi-deserted Sunday streets, and have something to eat.

Less than an hour later, she was settled at a table on the balcony of the Fifth Avenue branch of Bickfords at Forty-second Street reading the 1944 diary over an order of scrambled eggs and sausages. In this one, Beth related her adventures while singing with USO camp shows in the States and overseas.

Reading her roommate's innermost thoughts filled Marilu with regret that envy had kept her from seeing her as she really was—wide-eyed and enthusiastic. She had seen New York as Walter Winchell saw it, as "Bagdad on the Hudson"—unlike Marilu, who thought of it as a dog-eat-dog jungle. And Beth's romanticism became even more evident when she chronicled her months in Italy, especially Naples.

Moving from the peaceful Caserta Vecchio to Bagnoli on the outskirts of the city, she had raced to the topmost balcony of a jam-packed San Carlo Opera House to hear Jascha Heifetz play. She had sung for soldiers while Vesuvius spewed molten lava high into the sky before falling back on the mountain and inching its way down to the valley below. She had heard Padre Pio say Mass in San Giovanni the same week she was photographed at the Army airfield in Foggia, painting *Happy Birthday to Hitler* on a fat silver-grey bomb. When the USO unit she had come with left to return to the States, Beth had stayed on in Italy, singing in hospitals.

And then Marilu found what she had been looking for—the reason why Beth had been so terrified of the pale-eyed man.

Running up the stairs to Sadie's room, she knocked and Sadie said to come in. Marilu burst through the door. "Oh!" she was brought up short by the sight of a man wearing mirror-lensed glasses over by the window.

"Marilu," Sadie said.

Carter Harris took off the glasses and put them in his shirt pocket.

Marilu looked away from him to Sadie. "I'd like to talk with you in private."

"Look, Miss Jennings, no matter what you may think, I had nothing to do with Liz's death. I loved her." Harris's voice held the ring of truth.

Marilu fumbled in her bag for Beth's diary, found the place, and handed it to Sadie. She pointed to the first of a series of short entries. "It's Beth's diary for 1944."

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Sadie read from it aloud.

" 'After I saw Garfield, Foy, and the rest off on the plane I moved from the Parco to my new billet at the Terminus Hotel beside Garibaldi Railroad Station. It's lit up night and day. Ruby, a First Lieutenant who eats at the hotel, has invited some of us with USO to a bath-and-cocoa party at his apartment on the other side of the city. As most of the heating, as well as the elevators, were sabotaged by the retreating Germans, a hot bath sounds delicious.' " Sadie looked up at Marilu. "I don't see what this has to do with anything."

"Keep reading."

Looking from Marilu to Carter and back to Marilu, Sadie shrugged and read on. " 'With eight of us there, clutching soap and towels, it looked like an all-night affair. Finally, at three A.M. I decided to leave. The pick-up time was only four hours away and I needed some sleep. With the clouds reflecting the station lights, it was easy enough to find the way. But when I was almost back to the hotel, the air-raid siren went off and the street was as bright as day. I started toward the nearest shelter, then I heard sounds that drew me to an archway near the corner of the street. And there in the shadows a bare-headed American soldier was systematically beating a fellow officer's head to a pulp. The double silver bars gleaming on his shoulder told me he was a captain.

" 'I cried out and he turned his head in my direction, rose to his feet, and came toward me, gripping a blood-stained stone in his hand. He was slim and dark, not very tall. His eyes chilled me to the marrow. They were like two ovals of white marble centered with tiny specks of jet. I suppose they were a very pale blue or green but in the light from the flares they appeared to have no irises at all. I stood there pinned to the cement, then a hand grabbed my arm and I was pulled along the street to the air-raid shelter by a Scottish soldier.' "

Sadie turned a page. " 'The body was found in the doorway the next day, beaten beyond recognition. Identified by his dogtags, he was Marvin Kane.' "

"Marvin Kane, the actor?" Harris said. "I thought he was killed in an airplane accident."

"What has this to do with Beth?" Sadie asked Marilu.

Marilu presented the 1949 diary. "Read that." She'd marked the place.

When Sadie had read the passage aloud, Carter Harris poured himself a Scotch. "So what? This all happened so long ago. When

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Liz knew Martin Kane was the victim of the attack she'd witnessed, why didn't she report it?"

"She was young and scared, I suppose. But there's no use speculating."

"Sadie, in the back of the 1949 diary are Beth's appointments. She had two interviews the day she saw the man with the pale eyes. One was with Zane Gerson, who produces those awful South Sea girlie movies—he's been casting for the past six months. The other one was with Stephen Browne."

Max Seneca was holding court in Lindy's, surrounded by a half dozen show girls he left reluctantly when Sadie beckoned. When he slid in the booth beside her, facing Marilu and Carter, and heard about their suspicions, he helped them prepare a plan of action.

Seneca booked a rehearsal hall at Nola Studios on West Fifty-seventh Street every Wednesday from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. As both Zane Gerson and Stephen Browne were still casting, he would phone to invite them to auditions to be held on the upcoming Wednesday. In order to insure their attendance, he would promise them mention in a column or two—Leonard Lyons and Winchell for sure. Sadie would supply the pretty girls as well as act as accompanist. Carter, an ex-Marine, volunteered to provide muscle in case Marilu's suspicions were correct and Max offered to borrow a blackjack to supplement the knuckledusters that lived in his jacket pocket.

At 2:50 on Wednesday, Sadie was at Nola Studios seated by the baby grand piano at one end of the 20 × 30′ rehearsal room. Midway toward the other end, a table with four chairs awaited the producers. Carter Harris lounged in the doorway, watching Max fidget. Seven Brownstone girls with nothing better to do that afternoon were scattered around the room, the dancers limbering up at the bar along the mirror wall, the singers, including the flighty Patsy Fisher, humming through their noses and making other noises peculiar to their breed. Marilu stood by the open window clutching Beth's diary for 1944. As the wall clock approached three, Max once again reminded the girls that they were to leave directly after they had auditioned.

Stephen Browne, casual in seersucker, was followed out of the elevator by Zane Gerson, who wore a collar and tie beneath a navy mohair suit. Both men wore dark glasses, neither of the mirror-lensed variety, during the auditions that began as soon as they sat themselves at the viewing table.

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While the singers sang and the dancers danced, Marilu watched the two men with growing doubt that either one could be the man mentioned in Beth's diary. The chain-smoking Browne looked rumpled and inoffensive. Zane Gerson seemed too self-possessed to place himself in any situation that might require such an extreme measure as murder.

By four o'clock Patsy Fisher and all of the other girls had auditioned and were gone and it was Marilu's turn. She was rattling with nerves and made two false starts before managing to arrive at the key in which Sadie was playing "Lili Marlene."

After singing one scene-setting chorus, she began to read from Beth's diary, beginning where the air-raid siren sounded. As she read, she moved slowly toward the men at the table until, as the pale-eyed Captain was mentioned, her skirt brushed the table edge. For a moment she looked up and, with lashes lowered, she asked, "Why did you kill Marvin Kane, Captain?"

In answer, Zane Gerson swiftly rounded the table and grabbed Marilu backward against himself. A single bound carried Carter from the door to the table. Max felt in his briefcase for the blackjack. "All of you stop where you are," Gerson said quietly, allowing the revolver that was now pressing into Marilu's ribs to underline the words. Suddenly the door burst open.

"Max, I'm sorry to bother you, but I forgot what you told us—*oh!*" Patsy Fisher inadvertently attracted Gerson's attention away from Marilu long enough for Marilu to drive her heel into his instep. Startled by the pain, he loosened his grip and Carter brought him to the floor with a flying tackle. The gun, released, skittered toward the piano, where Sadie kicked it to Max, who snatched it up.

"Call the police!" Harris said.

As Max ran to a phone, Sadie came away from the piano. "And now, my dear Captain, I think we should have a look at those famous eyes of yours," she said, and removing Gerson's dark glasses. The jet-centered irises now revealed were so pale a blue that it was almost impossible to see where the whites of his eyes began.

In Sadie's room later that night, after hours at the police station, Max, Carter, Marilu, and Sadie rehashed Gerson's statement.

Both Marvin Kane and Gerson had been captains with Army Special Services when Kane had found out that Gerson was involved in the black market operating in North Africa. The actor threatened to blow the whistle on Gerson and Gerson had agreed to desist—and

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kept his word until Kane was transferred to Naples a month later. Then Gerson had hitched a ride to Naples on a courier flight, attended to Kane, and was back in Algiers before anyone had noticed he was gone.

The only problem remained the girl who had caught him in the act of dispatching Kane. When she didn't come forward, Gerson began to forget her and feel reasonably safe. Then, five years later, she had walked into his office. They had talked for a quarter of an hour and he was sure she hadn't recognized him, but when she returned for her gloves and saw him without his dark glasses, her sudden pallor was a dead giveaway. Because she had been seen coming in, Gerson let her leave, but there was no way he could trust that she would keep silent a second time. A meeting would have to be arranged without involving her agent.

She had mentioned living at Sadie Gold's Brownstone. Two days later, Gerson had left a message there for her to be at the Empire Theater that afternoon for an audition for a new Vinton Freedley musical.

A few minutes after five, Beth, having found the theater doors locked, stood under the marquee wondering whether to leave. Gerson watched from a distance. Then, swept up in a rush of homeward-bound workers, she was no longer visible to him. He followed the crowd in the direction of Times Square and saw her again. It was difficult to keep her in sight. If the traffic lights hadn't changed, momentarily clearing the sidewalk, he wouldn't have seen her descend into the subway.

He raced down the stairs and found change for the turnstile. As she pushed through the crowd waiting for the next train, Beth had kept looking back with terror-filled eyes. A rumbling had sounded in the tunnel. Gerson had to hurry now if he was to reach her in time. But he never caught up with her. Beth had just kept on shoving and glancing back over her shoulder until there was no platform left and she stepped down into the path of the onrushing train.

"That's his story," said Max.

"Patsy Fisher probably saved our lives," Marilu reflected.

"And Gerson's." Max was unhappy.

"Not if I can help it," Sadie assured him. She smiled at Marilu. "Five years probably seems like a long time to you, Marilu, but it isn't. The United States Army doesn't forget its men and women and those who put themselves in danger to entertain them. Patsy didn't save Zane Gerson. You and I and the Army will see to that."

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THE WILL OF HEAVEN

by GARY ALEXANDER

The Communists had swallowed Nguyen Van Thanh's city, but they were unable to digest it. Ho Chi Minh City remained Saigon and the Saigonese remained Saigonese. Wall posters and shortages had not changed that.

Thanh sold food and drink from a wheeled cart, of which he was immensely proud. It was made of hardwood that he polished until it shone like silk. Mounted above to deflect the rains was a scrap-metal canopy, a canopy without a speck of rust. The Americans, in mocking tones, had called his cart a "Howard Johnson." Thanh was not insulted—he neither knew nor cared what they meant.

Every day in the pre-dawn, Thanh trudged to the public market for his merchandise—dried fish, bread, sandwich makings, and pastries, whatever was available. Later in the day, he cooled bottles of soda in the lower compartment with chunks of ice bought from men who pedalled their wagons in a furious and hopeless race with the tropical sun.

Times were hard, but they had never been easy. Food and drink were scarce, customers with money even scarcer. The French were gone. The Americans were gone. The Russians, known unaffectionately as Americans without dollars, rarely stopped to buy. And Vietnamese with full pockets were reluctant to display their good fortune, as such behavior left one open to criticism.

Life had improved lately, though. Or so it seemed. Thanh had something new to sell: American cigarettes. Diplomats, journalists, and discreet Party officials would pay 200 dong for a single package. The teacher of Thanh's grandchildren earned only 600 dong a month.

For the first time in ten years, Thanh could feed his family and still have a little money left over. He believed the cigarettes to be a blessing. That is, until the trouble.

Thanks to his newfound prosperity, Thanh was able to pay a few dong a week to a policeman for the privilege of parking his cart at

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a good location—a spot half a kilometer from his home but very near Catinet, the avenue of the rich.

The French had named the elegant strip of bars, restaurants, and hotels Rue Catinet. The government controlled by the Americans had renamed it Tu Do, or Freedom Street. Now it was Dong Khoi, the Street of Simultaneous Uprisings. But to Thanh and his fellow Saigonese, Catinet was Catinet, an unimaginable place where an evening of nightclub fun would cost an ordinary laborer three months' wages.

Thanh worked at the side of a theater. The theater was closed, doors nailed shut, pictures of Sabu on the marquee plastered over with posters of Ho Chi Minh, but Thanh could see Catinet and potential customers could see his cart. It was there that Comrade Vo approached him.

"Comrade Thanh," Vo said, extending a hand. "I am happy to finally meet you. People in the neighborhood told me where you are. I am happy that you are doing so well."

Thanh took Vo's hand, forcing a broad smile. Vo was the new neighborhood political cadre. He was a Northerner, from Hanoi, as foreign to Thanh as the tall, fleshy Caucasians. Vo was young and hard-eyed. He had moved into the home of Thanh's friend Minh, a government clerk. There had been whispers about Vo, quiet fears spoken, but Thanh had avoided the stories as he avoided the cadre himself.

"I came to talk to you," Vo went on, "because I've wondered why I do not see you at political discussion meetings."

"I think I am too old to be of use," Thanh answered nervously.

"You are too old for improvement?" Vo asked. "You have lived your many years under the boot of decadence and you cannot change your thinking through education and self-criticism?"

Thanh lowered his eyes. He was short among the short, stooped from age and the burden of pushing his cart. His teeth were blackened from chewing betal nut. On one cheek was a scar, a gift from a Japanese soldier in the first war Thanh could remember, the result of a rifle butt when he was too slow to obey a command in a language he did not know.

"How is your son?"

Thanh looked up. He began to speak, but maintained his silence. It hurt him to think of Pham, whose crime had been to be inducted into the former government's Army. After Liberation, he had been

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sent away for re-education. Other soldiers of Thieu's Army had been released. Pham had not.

"Your son fought bravely, but wrongly. Re-education cadre report that he is not receptive to new ideas."

Thanh shrugged. "We receive letters. They say little and I do not understand politics."

"Perhaps I can write his teachers," Vo said. "I can inquire about his progress and tell them that if he were graduated, he would be coming home to a family with proper revolutionary attitudes."

"His mother and I would be grateful," Thanh said, growing suspicious. In Saigon, one did not offer gifts to a stranger without a reason, without a price.

"Thi, your daughter, concerns me, too," Vo said.

Thanh felt a chill. Thi had been a typist in the MACV office. She had many American friends, spoke their language, read their books, and wore Western clothing. She had escaped on a helicopter that fled from the roof of the U.S. Embassy. She was now living in a city called San Francisco. Thi had recently married a man with a good job. She had money and it was from her that Thanh received the cigarettes—cartons and cartons of them.

"I do not often hear from her," Thanh lied.

Vo smiled, looking through him. "Yes, of course. It is sad, not your fault at all, but she is probably ruined, and those with a mean spirit might think you are influenced by her cowardice and counterrevolutionary ideas."

"I obey the laws," Thanh said. "I harm no one."

"I am told that your daughter provides help to you and your family," Vo said, ignoring his answer. "You are respected by your friends and neighbors. You are old, with much experience in life. They value your wisdom. Your presence at our meetings—"

"I shall be honored to attend," Thanh said.

"No, no," Vo said, shaking his head. "You must attend of your own free choice. If you come because you feel you must, nothing would be gained."

Having misjudged the cadre's price, Thanh fell silent once more, Uncle Ho's visage looming heavily above him.

"The road to socialism is a hard and arduous one," Vo said. "The end of the journey will not be reached until everyone is equal. In Ho Chi Minh City, that has proven a difficult task. The people cling to their decadent ways. However, sacrifice does not mean that all pleasures must be shunned."

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In the word "pleasures" did Thanh first sense a link between him and this Northerner, this alien.

"Our friends meet to learn of socialism after long days of work," Vo went on. "They are tired and tense. They are skeptical of new teachings and cannot relax."

Thanh now knew. He reached inside a compartment and took out two packages of cigarettes. He gave them to Vo, saying, "If these are given to the people, perhaps they will be more relaxed, more able to learn." As Vo accepted the cigarettes, Thanh studied his face for an expression of surprise. There was none.

Thanh lived in a two-room house with his wife, Pham's wife, and their three children. They had a toilet in the rear, a small cookstove, and a radio and television left behind by Thi. Thanh felt content there. Others endured with much less.

Until today, he had not been bothered by the authorities since a month after Liberation, when soldiers confiscated Thi's counterrevolutionary belongings—her typewriter, her phonograph and Western records, and some of her books. Despite Thanh's protests, Lin had hidden Thi's favorite books—not because of the risk, but because she had the notion that Thi would one day come home.

That evening, Thanh sent his daughter-in-law and grandchildren on an errand and told Lin about Comrade Vo's visit.

"Minh's wife complains about Vo," his wife said. "He pays nothing for his food. Others also talk. Quoc the tailor mended trousers for Vo and Vo did not pay him, either. I am afraid he will take cigarettes from you again and again. If you refuse, he will have you arrested for being against the government."

"I know," Thanh said wearily.

"Is there nothing we can do?" she asked. "We will soon be as poor as we were before."

"There is nothing," Thanh said. "Nothing for now. There has always been a Vo, there have always been governments that tell us what to do and how to behave—it is the will of Heaven. We can no more change these events than we can change the direction of the wind. It would be foolish to try."

Thanh's wife nodded in agreement, but added, "This is a foul-smelling wind."

Vo did take more cigarettes from Thanh, three times a week. He never demanded them, but somehow Thanh always offered, usually

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after mention of Pham and Thi. The cadre was indeed clever and it was this cleverness that frustrated Thanh most of all.

Vo frustrated Thanh's neighbors, too, so much that they came to his home one night after dark, sneaking inside like thieves.

Minh, the government clerk, was the first to speak. "Thanh, we have come to you for advice because of your age and wisdom. Vo pays us nothing to live at our home and he eats like two men. When I hint of payment, he tells me that revolutionary joy is sufficient payment and that we all must sacrifice—the same stupid things he says at meetings I am afraid not to attend. He reminds me that I was a clerk for the Thieu regime, too. Then he tells me that my cooperation may earn me a promotion. He threatens me and promises things in a single breath. I am confused."

Quoc, the tailor, said, "He does that to all of us. I repair his clothes and am now sewing him a new shirt. He knows that before Liberation I altered Army uniforms and sewed insignia on them. He tells me that I have been poisoned by the Thieu government and their American running dogs. When I agree to his demands, he promises to talk to officials about getting my cloth ration increased."

Phu, the mechanic, was next. "Thanh, when Saigon was filled with cars and motorbikes, I fixed them and sold parts. Vo says I was a prostitute of the bourgeois. My customers have only bicycles now. I gave Vo tires for his because he said they were worn out and he could not use it to get around on important Party business. He lied. His tires are good. I know he sold them. You must stand in lines and pay many dong to buy a tire at a government store. He says he knows somebody who can supply me with all the tires and tubes I need. I have not yet seen them."

Then Thanh told his story. His friends were sympathetic.

"You have the most to win or to lose," Quoc said. "Comrade Vo has power over us, but he claims to have power over Pham, too. Is this true? Can he persuade them to release your son from the re-education camp?"

"How can I know?" Thanh said. "How can I risk defying him?"

Minh said angrily, "Having him in my home is unbearable. We must do something."

"We cannot," Thanh told them. "Vo is but a strand of hair on the monster. If we pluck it another will grow in its place, one that might be even coarser."

"Remember Loc, Vo's predecessor before he was sent home to Hanoi," Phu argued. "He preached socialism to us and asked us to spy

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on our friends. But he did not take bread from our mouths. If Vo is replaced, maybe the new cadre will be a finer hair."

Finally Thanh said, thinking, staring at Lin: "I see your point. If a river swollen by the monsoons rises, we may, by digging a trench with our bare hands, divert a small trickle that is enough to prevent the river from raging over us."

The men agreed unanimously.

A certain telepathy exists between a man and woman who have been married over forty years. Without a word, Lin excused herself and left the room. She returned in a moment with a dusty bundle wrapped in paper and string. Her eyes were glassy with tears.

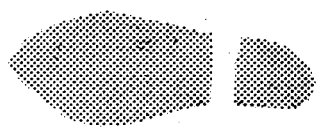
Thanh took it from her and said that he had a possible solution, addressing his suggestions primarily to Minh.

The day after the next, Vo was escorted from Minh's home by two soldiers. Everybody in the neighborhood observed them as they walked—Vo talkative, gesturing with his hands, the soldiers impassive. If Vo or the soldiers had looked back, all eyes would have quickly averted.

But they did not look back. Thanh saw that one soldier carried Thi's precious books, the books Minh had secreted in Vo's belongings before notifying the authorities.

Thanh did not understand the contents of the books—one of which was the life story of an American patriot named Lincoln, another a schoolbook devoted to the study of the U.S. government. There was a Christian Bible, a text of the English language, several volumes of poetry, and a thick series of essays defending the American involvement in Vietnam.

Thanh *did* understand that they were counterrevolutionary. Maybe soon, he thought, Vo would meet Pham. In his next letter, he would have to ask.



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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

One of the finest general commentaries on our field was Julian Symons' *Mortal Consequences* (1972), now out of print for some years. Symons' perspective, as he said, was that of the addict, not the academic, and his was a polished and insightful account of personal enthusiasms, discoveries, and disappointments.

To make 1985 something of a banner year, *Mortal Consequences* has been reissued in a revised and updated edition under the original British title, *Bloody Murder* (Viking, $14.95). The first half of the book, comprising a history of crime fiction, is mostly unchanged, but much new material appears in the second half, reflecting the arrivals of important new authors on the scene (Janwillem van de Wetering, George V. Higgins, P. D. James, Ruth Rendell, Ross Thomas, Charles McCarry, P. B. Yuill), and reappraisals of others. Symons concludes by considering how six predictions he made in 1972 have fared (generally quite well). Everyone with a serious interest in the field will want this.

In *Bloody Murder* Symons praises Dashiell Hammett highly, finding strengths in his fiction not present in that of his successors Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. Symons enlarges on these views in an excellent biography and critical analysis, *Dashiell Hammett*, the fifth (and second mystery writer) in Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's Album Biographies ($24.95). This compact and illustrated work, developed with assistance from other Hammett experts (Richard Layman, William F. Nolan), impressively captures and integrates Hammett's life and work.

Thomas Perry's *Big Fish* (Scribners, $15.95) may not quite be the equal of its predecessors (particularly the wholly delightful *Metzger's Dog*), but after a jerky beginning it achieves form and proves to be a quirky, humorous affair, full of bloody doings and suspense, lacking only a real sense of menace to be a gem. Altmeyer imports and exports this and that, very profitably and very illegally. Someone hires him to buy a load of automatic weapons and ship them to Japan. This proves to be a setup, but for what? Altmeyer and colleagues go for help to Arthur, a movie producer, a brilliant chap who owns half the world. Useful ally. Off to Japan, to Belgium, a-killing we go . . .

Benny Cooperman, Canadian private eye (a rare breed), returns in *Murder on Location* (St. Martin's, $12.95) by Howard Engel. This is a smoothly effective tale, quite convincing in its film-making detail. Benny is hired to find a missing wife, presumed to have succumbed to the lure of a big-budget movie being shot on Niagara Falls. He's drawn into the in-

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trigues and lusts of the movie folk, the machinations and mobsters involved in its financial backing, and the deaths that result. Cooperman is a well met fellow, a whole lot more human than many of the traditional run of corrugated-skull P.I.'s who go around bashing and getting bashed.

Another film-making setting, this time English, arrives in Laurence Payne's excellent *Malice in Camera* (Doubleday, $12.95). Mark Savage, actor turned private detective, reappears to assist his former mentor, famed movie director Andrew Elliot, whose latest film project is plagued with delays. Sabotage, thinks Elliot. Little does he know: hatred, layer upon corrosive layer, schemes nearby . . . This is a most compelling tale, one in which menace and malignancy march off the pages with great effect.

If the motivation hadn't remained a little too obscure, I would have called *Help the Poor Struggler* (Little Brown, $15.95) the best of Martha Grimes' six novels about Scotland Yard's Inspector Richard Jury. It's certainly an engaging tale, with excellent supporting characters. Someone is abroad in Devonshire, knifing children. Macalvie, a tough policeman with an almost alarmingly high success rate in his cases, is still obsessed with one twenty-year-old murder he failed to solve. And then its survivors turn up in the present killings. The grim Macalvie and the stylish Jury strike sparks together, and heroism comes from an unexpected direction.

The third appearance for London private investigator Anna Lee is *Stalker* (Scribners, $11.95) by Liza Cody, a strong tale in a good series. The client wants a defrauding furniture maker found—a trivial matter, it would seem. But he doesn't appear at his shop or home, and his wife seems to have a couple of strongarm "minders" hovering about. Strange business. Anna follows leads to antique sales in the country, where she learns more of her target's naughty enterprises. But of him no sight is to be had. Then why is someone so determined to turn her off the scent?

Bill Pronzini's "Nameless" private eye and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone appear together in their collaborative novel *Double* (St. Martin's, $13.95). McCone and Nameless are separately attending a private investigator's convention in San Diego. They are drawn together when Nameless witnesses a friend of Sharon's fall to her death from their hotel. McCone isn't comfortable with the police notion of suicide, and Nameless is bothered by one or two other odd events. So, working from separate corners of the puzzle, they move toward a center neither has any view of. Pleasant stuff; the approach of alternating first person chapters basically works well.

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a *NEW* Libby Knowles story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Protection, not detection, that's my business," Libby told Krista Steele. "Just because I was with the police people always think I can solve crimes."

Then again, that may not be the only reason, Libby . . .

WAIT UNTIL MORNING

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a man named Matt Milton who telephoned the Libby Knowles Protection Service on a hot Monday morning in August. Libby's secretary Janice said he sounded like a client and Libby took the call.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Milton?"

"Am I speaking to Libby Knowles?"

"That's correct."

"I'm calling about an extremely confidential matter involving one of my clients."

"Are you a private investigator, Mr. Milton?"

"I'm a personal manager. An agent. You must have heard of my client, Krista Steele, the rock singer?"

"I don't follow the contemporary music scene as closely as I should," Libby admitted. "Is your client in need of protection?"

"She is."

"From fans, or from some specific person?"

"From herself. She's been using cocaine and other drugs lately, and she's finally agreed to my suggestion she hire a bodyguard to keep her off the stuff. Is it the sort of thing you could do?"

"It's not what I'm in business to do," Libby said, "but if your client is willing to cooperate, I could give it a try."

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"Good. Could you meet with Krista and me this afternoon at my office? We'll discuss your duties and your fees."

Matt Milton was a fatherly looking man in his fifties who wore a string tie of the sort Libby remembered from movies of the Old South. He was a bit chubby around the middle and smoked expensive-looking cigars. He was the last person in the world one might expect to be promoting the career of Krista Steele.

Krista was slender and tall—close to Libby's own five-foot-eight. She wore a dangling earring in her right ear. Her hair was all on the left, hiding that ear, and her pale-blue eyes were almost lost in a maze of harsh black eyeliner. Her silk dress looked expensive. She pouted at Libby from her chair. "You're going to be my nursemaid?" she asked in a cold voice.

"If you need one. But what you'll be hiring is a bodyguard, and I don't come cheap."

"I thought bodyguards were male," Krista said, fidgeting with the clasp of her little purse.

Matt Milton cleared his throat. "I thought Miss Knowles could do the job better, without distractions. She's highly recommended."

Krista studied Libby for another moment and then asked, "You know what you're supposed to do?"

"Tell me."

"Keep me off drugs—cocaine, speed, grass, LSD. If you see me buying anything or taking something from a stash someplace, take it away from me."

"All right. Will you be cooperative?"

When Krista didn't answer, Matt Milton did. "Yes, she'll cooperate. But if she resists you, be as firm as necessary. That's what you're being paid for. We'll pay you a thousand dollars a week. Is that satisfactory?"

It was more money than Libby had ever made before. "Plus expenses?"

"Plus expenses."

"For how long?"

"Week to week, till we see how it goes."

"How much travel is involved?"

Krista Steele shifted in her chair. She stopped playing with the clasp on her purse and said, "I have a concert tour next month, but for the next few weeks there are only recording dates here in town, and rehearsals."

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"Will I be living with you?"

"We'd expect full-time service," Milton said. "Is that a problem?"

"No, I'm used to it."

"How soon can you start?"

"As soon as I phone my office."

Matt Milton smiled. "I believe tomorrow morning will be satisfactory. Krista has a recording date then. This is her address."

As he wrote it on a card, Krista stood up. "You'd better be worth the money," she told Libby and walked out of the office.

Libby turned to the agent. "One thing I don't quite understand, Mr. Milton. Do I get fired for doing a poor job, or for doing a good job?"

Krista Steele lived in a fourteenth-floor condominium near the center of the city. The doorman looked like an ex-wrestler and there was a television camera in the elevator. It was obviously a place for people who worried about security. Her apartment was large and well furnished, with a fine view of the river, but Libby's first impression when she entered was the sweetish odor of marijuana smoke that accompanied the leather-jacketed young man who was just leaving.

He passed her without speaking and Libby asked, "Who was that?"

"Sonny Ritz, an old pal from before I hit the big time. I figured I needed one last night of kicks before I went on the wagon."

"Did he supply the pot?"

"Yeah."

"Is he your pusher?"

"I told you, he's an old friend." She hadn't yet gotten around to making up her eyes and the rest of her face, and Libby saw something sweet and almost innocent about her face.

"Is there any more pot around?" Libby asked her.

Krista shook her head. "Search the place if you don't believe me. Want some breakfast?"

"I already ate, but I'll take another cup of coffee."

Krista was wearing a lounging robe that had started to come open, and she seemed to have nothing on beneath it. "So tell me about yourself," she said in the kitchen. "If we're going to be together all the time I guess I should know what I hired."

"I used to be a policewoman," Libby said. "Now I run this protection business."

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"Are you married?" Krista opened a can of food for a large aggressive white cat that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Libby shook her head. "My boyfriend was killed. He was a cop, too. He was involved in a cocaine scandal and smashed up his car."

"Why are you telling me this?" Krista asked, pouring some coffee.

"Because you asked me. Because I thought maybe you'd be interested in knowing that cocaine almost ruined my life, too."

"I get all the lectures I need from Matt." Krista went into the bedroom and started to dress.

Libby followed her. "How old are you, Krista?"

"Twenty-four. I started out in a Greenwich Village club and hit it big with the theme from *August Heat.* They did a neat video of me dancing around a fireman while he squirted his hose at me. The kids went wild with it and the album sold a couple of million copies. Now I'm doing more albums and I've got the concerts coming up. Maybe you saw me on that late-night show last Friday."

"No, I've never seen you. But I'm sure you're good."

"Fox wants me to star in a movie after my tour. I'm thinking about it. That's one reason why Matt wants me off the stuff. He says it's ruining my career. God, he's worse than my father!"

"Where are your folks?"

"They live outside Chicago. I haven't seen them in a year, but I send money home once in a while. You grow away from them in this business, you know?"

She had pulled on tight jeans and a blouse, which Libby supposed must be her recording costume. "What time are you due at the studio?"

"Whenever I get there." She started combing her hair. The earring had apparently stayed in her right ear all night. "Do you carry a gun?"

"Sure," Libby said.

"Where?"

"In my purse. Sometimes under my clothes."

"Where under your clothes?"

"Strapped to my thigh."

"That must be a real kick."

"It's damned uncomfortable, if you want to know," Libby said.

They rode down in the elevator to the basement and walked directly to an underground parking garage for tenants. Libby saw no

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sign of a parking attendant and decided the security wasn't that great after all.

Krista insisted on driving and took the wheel of the little white sportscar as if she'd been born with it in her hands. Weaving in and out of the morning traffic, they arrived at the suburban recording studio in fifteen minutes. "Matt keeps telling me I should record in Nashville, and I'm going to after this record," she said as they entered the building. "But Shawn Gibbs has been good to me. His setup's the best in town. Here are a couple of full-sized studios and behind this blank wall is another one he rarely uses."

Gibbs, a tense, balding man with hornrimmed glasses, was pacing the corridor awaiting Krista's arrival. "The musicians have been tuning up for an hour," he told her. "We have to pay them, you know."

Krista kissed him lightly on the cheek. "This is Libby Knowles. She's my bodyguard."

He shook Libby's hand limply, not giving her a second look.

Inside the studio, Matt Milton seemed relieved to see Libby. "You're late. I was worried," he said.

Krista dropped her purse and sunglasses on a chair and accepted some sheet music from a bearded young man with an electric guitar.

"Fill me in on some of these people," Libby said to Matt.

"The beard with the guitar is Zap Richards. He's Krista's arranger and composes some of her songs, too. He did the *August Heat* theme. They've been friends for years. The rest are local musicians Shawn hires for the sessions."

Libby glanced around at the expensive equipment. "He seems to be really big time."

"He is now, since Krista hit the top. He'd be lost without her."

"Do you know someone named Sonny Ritz?"

The agent frowned. "That crud! Has he been around?"

"He was at her apartment when I arrived this morning."

"Don't let him near her again," Milton said firmly, "or sure as hell he'll slip her something she shouldn't have."

They started recording the first number and Libby settled back to enjoy it. Krista Steele's voice was a surprise, deep and mellow and assured. She needed very few tricks to put across the song. She built to a climax that brought enthusiastic applause from Matt and Shawn outside the recording booth, and Zap Richards put aside his

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guitar to give her a hug. But she wasn't satisfied and insisted that they run through it once more before it sounded right to her.

The second number was just as good, but on the third one she started having trouble. Twice she stopped in the middle, and the third time she still wasn't satisfied. Finally, she called for a break and picked up her purse, heading for the ladies' room.

"Go with her," Milton told Libby. "Make sure she doesn't take anything."

Libby was following Krista when Zap Richards emerged from the studio to block her path. "She just needs to freshen up," he said. "She won't be a minute." His long slender fingers caught Libby's arm but she brushed them away.

"Neither will I," she said.

Krista was standing on one of the toilet seats, reaching up through a ceiling panel. Her hand reappeared with a plastic envelope full of white powder. Libby quickly crossed the tiled floor and grabbed it from her. "I'll take that."

"No! I need it to get me started for this next number!" Krista tried to claw the envelope out of Libby's hand, but Libby ripped it open and poured the cocaine into the toilet.

"I'm just doing what you hired me for, Krista. Is there any more hidden up there?"

"No!"

Libby climbed up beside her to take a look. She pulled two more plastic envelopes from where Krista was reaching for them and emptied the contents down the toilet. "I'm not kidding, Krista, and it's time you realized it. You can have your agent fire me, but you can't con me into not doing my job. You hired a bodyguard and that's what you've got."

Krista returned to the recording studio, pouting and unhappy. Her first attempt at the song was again off-key, but she took a few minutes' break and did better the second time. Shawn Gibbs applauded on the third try and told her they'd use that one. She nodded nervously and said, "That's it. We'll have to do the rest tomorrow."

Zap Richards unplugged his guitar and came over to her. "You all right, Krista?"

"I'll make it." She gave him a half hearted smile.

He dug around in his pocket and produced a hand-rolled cigarette. "This is all I've got on me."

Libby stepped between them and Krista said, "Put it away, Zap. I don't want it."

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"This is some watchdog you hired for yourself."

"I've been called worse," Libby said.

They had a late lunch with Shawn Gibbs and Matt Milton. Gibbs was either pleased at the way the session had gone or he was putting a good face on it for Krista's benefit. He talked about his plans for the album and Matt tried to sell him on merchandising ideas connected with the upcoming concert tour. By the time they left the restaurant, the afternoon had pretty much ended and Krista had to go to her dressmaker's for a fitting.

Afterward, they headed back to the apartment. "We'll eat in tonight," Krista said. "Something light."

"Is this a fairly typical day?"

"Sometimes it's a little more exciting. There are a couple of parties this weekend. But I'm afraid next week you're going to have to sit through five days of dance class. I'm adding some dance numbers to my show."

"How long do you think you'll need me?"

"Maybe through the concert tour. If I can stay clean that long I should be okay." She hesitated and then added, "You did good work today, Libby. On that third number I was sure I needed a snort, but when you wouldn't let me have it I managed without it, didn't I?"

"You sure did."

Libby played with the cat for a while before they ate, but Krista's habit of allowing it to roam at will over chairs and tabletops turned her off. She had to race to finish her coffee before Tabby licked up his share. But the real challenge of the evening began with the return of Sonny Ritz, still wearing his leather jacket, shortly after ten o'clock. It seemed obvious to Libby that he intended to spend the night with Krista, and she didn't know how she could prevent a drug exchange from taking place without sharing the bed with them.

"This is your nursemaid, eh?" Sonny asked, looking Libby up and down with a smirk. "Do I have to wrestle her for you?"

"You're welcome to if you think you can," Libby said.

He made a grab for her and Libby sidestepped, catching his arm and twisting it behind him until he dropped to his knees. When she let him up, the color had drained from his face.

Krista loved it. "Sonny," she said, "you've finally met your match."

Sonny seemed not about to quit that easily, but the intercom

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buzzed and the doorman announced that Shawn Gibbs was on his way up to see Krista.

"What does he want this time of the night?" she complained. She turned to Sonny. "You'd better go. I'll call you in a few days."

"What is this, the brushoff?"

"Just go, Sonny. I'll call you, I promise."

He left just as Shawn Gibbs reached the door. Libby noticed they didn't speak.

"Is he still hanging around?" Gibbs asked Krista. "I thought you got rid of him."

Libby was checking out the area of the room Sonny had occupied, making certain he hadn't left any little envelopes for Krista.

"Sorry to come by so late," Gibbs said, "but something's come up at the studio."

"What's that?"

"Somebody stole the master tape of the three songs we recorded this morning."

"What?"

"At least I think it's been stolen. It could have been misfiled—I'm going to tear the place apart in the morning. But I wanted you to know we may have to do the whole thing over again."

Krista took the news in good humor. "It's not even in the stores yet and my public is clamoring for it. You'll make a mint on this one, Shawn."

"I'm glad you can take it so lightly. How about a drink to settle my nerves?"

"Be my guest," Krista said.

He poured three shots of bourbon and passed one to Libby without asking if she wanted it. After a sip, she left the rest on the table unfinished. She was a Scotch drinker, when she drank at all. "So was the studio broken into?" Krista wanted to know.

"No sign of it." Shawn Gibbs was nervous, sitting at the kitchen table with them for a time and then pacing back and forth. "I suspect an inside job, but I can't figure out who would have done it. If they wanted to steal the tape, why not wait until tomorrow when we were planning to finish it?"

"Maybe Libby here can find it for you."

Libby held up her hands. "Protection, not detection, that's my business. Just because I was with the police people always think I can solve crimes. Have you reported the theft to the police?"

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"Not yet," Shawn said. "I thought I'd wait until morning when I can make a more careful search."

He finished his drink and declined a second, saying he had to go. Krista saw him out and he promised to phone in the morning if the tape reappeared before her recording session at ten.

When they went to bed around midnight, Libby insisted on leaving the door between her room and Krista's open. She had trained herself to be a light sleeper when she was on a case and she knew any unusual movements by Krista would awaken her.

The telephone in Krista's bedroom rang somewhere toward dawn. The first bits of daylight were beginning to show through the closed blinds as Libby opened her eyes and listened. She heard Krista's voice, briefly, and then silence. She hadn't been able to make out her words, and decided it wasn't important until some minutes later, almost asleep again, she heard the apartment door close. The clock read 6:55.

She jumped out of bed and hurried barefoot into Krista's room. The bed was rumpled and empty. With a growing sense of panic, Libby checked the rest of the apartment and then the outer hall. Krista was gone and Libby had no idea where. She saw little point in phoning Matt Milton to report it. She was sitting on her bed, thinking about what to do, when Krista's telephone rang again. She glanced instinctively at the clock and saw that it was 7:22. Running to answer the phone, she prayed it was Krista.

It wasn't.

"Is this the residence of Krista Steele?" a male voice asked. He was reading the name off something and Libby knew at once it was a police officer.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Are you a relative, ma'am?"

"No. I work for Miss Steele," Libby replied.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, ma'am. There's been an automobile accident. Could you tell me how to reach the next of kin?"

"Next of—?"

"I'm awfully sorry, ma'am. Miss Steele was killed instantly."

Libby found her old friend, Sergeant O'Bannion, in his office when she reached police headquarters less than an hour later. He glanced up and gave her a grin. "A bit early for you, isn't it?" He was a large man with a big face that was more often gloomy than smiling.

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"There was a fatal car accident an hour or so ago, O'Bannion. Krista Steele, the singer, was killed. Do you have a report on it yet?"

"An hour ago? I doubt it. The investigating officers are probably still at the scene."

He got up to check a pile of forms on one of the other squadroom desks and she followed him.

"The officer said it happened on Dakota Street, near Windsor. The car hit a tree."

"Nothing here yet," he started to say, and then stopped. "What time did you say?"

"A little after seven."

"There's a report here of a fatal on Dakota Street, one car, driver killed, time about six-forty-five."

"That would have been too early," Libby said. "I was at her apartment and she didn't leave until at least ten minutes after that. It would have taken her another ten minutes to get her car and drive to Dakota Street."

"What's your connection with this, Libby?"

"She was a client."

"You were protecting her from a death threat?"

Libby shook her head. "She was on drugs and her agent convinced her to hire a bodyguard to keep her away from them."

"Odd sort of assignment. Okay, come along and we'll look into this."

They went first to check out the death car, which had been towed to a city lot nearby. There was no doubt it was the white sportscar Libby had ridden in the previous day, though now the interior was scorched and blackened by flames.

"According to the report, the body was burned beyond recognition," Libby heard O'Bannion say. "They identified her from the license number and the contents of her purse, which was thrown clear."

"Convenient."

"What?"

"If the accident happened at 6:45, it was someone else," Libby insisted. Quickly she went over the events of the previous day and that morning.

"You might have been wrong about the time," O'Bannion said.

"I was fully awake when I looked at that clock."

"Then maybe it wasn't Krista Steele you heard leaving at 6:55. Maybe this guy Ritz came back and spent the night, after all."

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"I'd have heard him. It was Krista who answered the phone and it was Krista who left at 6:55."

They went back to O'Bannion's office and read the report of the investigating officers. Both swore the accident happened no later than 6:45. They came upon the burning car while on routine patrol. Some nearby neighbors were already on the scene, awakened by the crash a few minutes earlier.

"Then it wasn't Krista," Libby said again.

They had to wait an hour for the preliminary report of the medical examiner. The body was that of a female in her early twenties, about the same height and weight as Krista Steele. Fingerprints were of no use since Krista's were not on file and the impact of the crash had caused such extensive damage in the area of the mouth that a comparison with Krista's dental records would be difficult if not impossible.

"I'll still lay you odds it's her," the sergeant said.

"Then how do you explain the time discrepancy?"

"Simple," he said with a shrug. "The clock you looked at was running fast."

Returning to Krista's condominium, Libby used her key to let them in. The white cat, Tabby, had awakened and was purring near the door as if expecting his mistress. Libby ignored him and went immediately to the bedroom she'd been using. "Here it is. Check it for yourself."

The clock was actually a couple of minutes slow.

"Somebody might have changed it," O'Bannion said rather lamely.

"If someone were going to change it, wouldn't they have changed it the other way, to discredit my story?"

O'Bannion sat down on the unmade bed. The cat jumped up beside him and the policeman stroked him absently under the chin. "You've got a point there," he admitted. "Let's check the downstairs garage."

The attendant didn't come on duty until eight o'clock and, as Libby had observed the previous day, even then security was not very tight. No one had been there to see Krista or her car leave. Though the garage door opened only from the inside, it wasn't impossible to suppose that someone had entered the garage through a fire door and stolen the car sometime before six-thirty.

"Why?" O'Bannion asked. "You think she's trying to pull an insurance fraud?"

"That's what I intend to find out," Libby said. "Whoever's behind

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this, they had to arrange for that crash. And *somebody* died in that car. Somebody was *murdered* in that car."

Matt Milton took the news of Krista's apparent death very hard. Even after Libby told him she had reason to believe the body was not Krista's the agent remained close to tears. "It's her all right," he said. "I always figured she'd end up this way. The drugs and—" He wiped his eyes with a handkerchief. "God knows I did my best to help her."

"Mr. Milton, I have to ask you this and I hope you'll forgive me. Could this whole thing be some sort of publicity stunt on Krista's part, to promote her new album?"

He stared at Libby as if she was out of her mind. "Publicity stunt! Why would she have allowed me to hire you if she was planning something like that?"

"To have a witness on the scene. After the funeral she could reappear, claiming it was a hitchhiker who died in the car and she wandered off after the crash with temporary amnesia."

"You're saying she'd cause someone's death for a publicity stunt," Milton said. "Krista would never do anything like that."

"Did you know the master tape from yesterday's session was stolen from Shawn Gibbs' studio last night?"

"Really? Who would do a thing like that?"

"Perhaps someone who knew it would be her last recording. I suppose that would give it some extra value."

"Now you're saying she's dead. Make up your mind, Miss Knowles."

But Libby couldn't make up her mind. She felt certain Krista hadn't died in the fiery crash, but that conclusion only opened a whole new barrel of questions. O'Bannion had promised to keep her informed of the police investigation, but when she left Milton's office and tried phoning him he was out.

She drove to the recording studio, where the gloom was even thicker than at Milton's office. Zap Richards met her just inside the door, looking naked and alone without his guitar. "One of the cops says you don't think she's dead. Is that true?"

"I don't know what to think," Libby admitted. "But I'm certainly not convinced she's dead."

She went on down the hall to Shawn Gibbs' office. The door was open. "I was hoping you'd come by," he said, looking up from his desk.

"How's it going?"

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"The place has been a madhouse. We've had two television crews and I don't know how many reporters here."

"Anything new on the missing tape?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. We found it. Zap was helping me search this morning, before we heard about Krista, and he found it in among some blank tapes."

"Could it have gotten there by accident?"

"I suppose so," he admitted, "but it's unlikely."

"What do you think happened to Krista?" Libby asked.

"I can't imagine."

She met O'Bannion for a drink at a bar across from headquarters. She occasionally liked to go there because it had been a hangout while she was on the force, but tonight it brought back unexpectedly painful memories of the man she'd loved—who'd died in a single-car accident. She'd always wondered if it was suicide, and now she found herself asking the same question about Krista. Maybe she had decided she couldn't go on living without drugs.

But there had been the phone call that had lured her out before seven. Someone had made that call.

"Case got you down?" O'Bannion asked, reading her silence.

"I can't get a grip on it," she admitted. "A tape is stolen and then reappears. Krista might be dead but maybe she isn't."

"The papers sure think she's dead. There are bigger headlines than she ever got alive."

"Anything more from the autopsy?"

"Yeah, but you're not going to like it. The body showed traces of heroin."

"Krista Steele wasn't on heroin!"

"Who knows what she was on, Libby?"

She played with her glass in silence for a moment, then asked, "Could the accident have been faked?"

"Sure. She could have been beaten to death and her teeth messed up earlier, then the killer could have spilled gasoline around the inside of the car, tied down the accelerator and the steering wheel, and aimed it at the tree. The fire would have burned any string or rope that was used."

"And if the body isn't Krista's, whose is it?"

"From the approximate age and traces of heroin, along with the fact that we have no new missing-person report, it could be some

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prostitute or drifter, chosen because she was about the same size and age."

"Then you're willing to accept that as a possibility?"

O'Bannion thought about it. "I've been a cop long enough to know that the most likely explanation is usually the true one, Libby. Your idea is pretty far-fetched. Bring me some more evidence and I'll listen."

"If the body is that of some prostitute or even a runaway, maybe her fingerprints are on file even if Krista's aren't."

"That's an idea," he admitted. "I'll see how badly the fingers were burned."

After leaving O'Bannion at the bar, Libby went back to Krista's apartment to gather up her things. The place still looked the same, even to the empty glasses on the table from the previous night, but Libby didn't stop to wash them. She was on her way out the door when the whole thing came to her in a flash.

She went back inside, unpacked her other gun, and changed from slacks to a full skirt.

Libby parked across the street from the recording studio and slipped out of the car, moving silently around the side of the building. The figure by the back door heard her just as he popped the lock. He whirled, but she had him covered with the revolver from her purse. "A little breaking and entering, Sonny?"

Sonny Ritz dropped the crowbar and took a step backward.

"Are you after Krista's tape, too?"

"I don't know anything about it."

"Then what are you doing breaking in here?"

"She kept a stash hidden in the ceiling of the ladies' john. I figure it won't do her any good now—I might as well have it."

"I beat you to it, Sonny. Now get lost."

"What?"

"Get lost before I call the cops."

He didn't need to be told again. He hurried down the alley, disappearing from view.

Libby waited another few seconds and then stepped inside through the jimmied door. A pen light from her purse helped guide her along the corridor. She avoided the recording studio Krista had used the previous day and went instead to the smaller, windowless studio that was rarely used. It was locked, of course. Libby fired a single

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shot into the lock area. The wood splintered but held, and she had to give it a sharp tug before the door finally came open.

A muffled groan reached her ears at once and she knew she'd guessed right. Her searching fingers found the light switch and in the sudden glare of brightness she saw Krista Steele bound and gagged on the leather couch.

Libby put down her pistol and quickly untied her, pulling the gag from her mouth.

"Thank God!" Krista gasped. "How did you find me?"

"I'd have been a hell of a bodyguard if I hadn't. Your cat—"

There was a sudden gasp from Krista, and Libby turned to see Shawn Gibbs standing in the doorway. He had a .45 automatic aimed at them. "Don't touch your gun," he warned Libby, "or I'll kill you both!"

"I'm not moving," Libby assured him.

"Raise your hands above your head!" he commanded. "Krista, you stay on that couch."

"Shawn, this is—"

"Shut up!" He motioned toward Libby.

"How did you find her here? When I heard the shot I thought it was the police."

"They're on the way," Libby bluffed.

"Not likely. You'd have waited for them. But tell me what I did wrong."

Libby saw the madness in his eyes now and knew she had to keep talking. "I was convinced Krista didn't die in that crash. Once I knew that, there were two things to implicate you—her purse and her cat. Krista didn't leave the apartment until 6:55, ten minutes or more after the accident. It couldn't have been her body in the car, yet the police identified her from the purse near the wreckage. If Krista couldn't have been there, how could her purse be there? Only if someone took it from the apartment earlier. She'd had it with her yesterday while she was recording. Two people visited us last night—you and Sonny Ritz. Sonny stayed only briefly and I watched him every second. You stayed longer, and you walked around nervously. You had plenty of opportunity to pick up that small purse and hide it under your shirt."

"You're a smart girl," Gibbs admitted.

"You know someone or found someone who resembled Krista in a general way and killed her this morning. You wanted to make

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sure the crash and the fire worked as planned before you kidnaped Krista, so you waited until after the crash to phone her—"

"He said it was something important about the stolen tape," Krista told Libby. "He said he'd pick me up in ten minutes."

"But of course the whole scheme wouldn't work if I was awake and heard the phone. I might have insisted on coming along. At the very least I'd know who called. How could you be sure I wouldn't wake up, Shawn? Only if you drugged my drink while you were stealing the purse. You were the one who suggested we have a drink. I only took a sip of mine and left the rest on the table, but tonight the glasses were all empty. If I didn't finish it, who did? Then I remembered how Tabby likes to climb up on tables and how he licked up my coffee. This morning he slept through two phone calls and Krista's departure—highly unusual behavior for a cat, unless he was drugged instead of me."

"You figured it all, didn't you?"

"Only you could have stolen the purse, only you could have drugged the drink. Stealing the car itself was no problem. You probably took the elevator straight to the garage after you left Krista's with the purse and used her own key to drive it away. You'd arranged the early-morning appointment with your victim and after killing her you phoned Krista from the crash scene. You picked her up by seven o'clock, drugged her, and brought her here before Zap and the others arrived.

"Figuring she was still alive, I asked myself where you could hide her. Then I remembered this windowless recording studio. These places are all soundproof—where better to hide her? She was going to leave you after this album and record in Nashville—she told me that—and you couldn't bear to lose her."

Krista spoke again from the couch. "He said they'd think I was dead and nobody would be looking for me. He'd keep me a prisoner and I'd record just for him. After six months or a year he'd pretend to find the recordings and say they were made before my death. He said they'd be worth a fortune."

"You can't keep her here," Libby told Gibbs, starting to lower her hands.

"Keep them up!" he barked, waving the gun.

Libby stepped back until her legs touched the couch. "No one stole that tape. It was an excuse to visit Krista last night and lure her from the apartment this morning."

"Time for you to shut up," Gibbs said.

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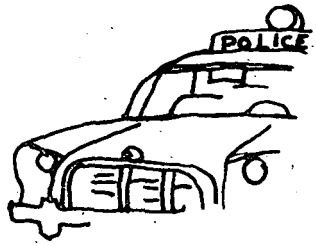
He was aiming the .45 when Krista's hand crept beneath Libby's skirt and found the second gun. She fired once and the bullet struck Shawn Gibbs in the right shoulder, spinning him around.

Libby crossed the room quickly and knocked the gun from his hand.

"Good work!" she told Krista.

"I remembered what you told me about your other gun."

"I should hire you for my bodyguard," Libby said. "Now get out to a phone and call the police."



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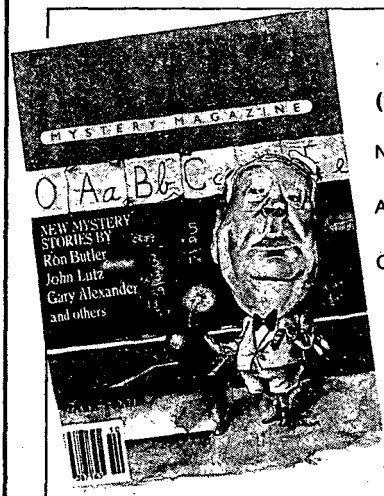

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

Piazza! Pigsty *was nearer the truth ever since the thugs and hooligans had started meeting there in the evenings. They had ruined it. They sat on their motorcycles swilling beer and picking at food from the takeaway shop, and littering the ground with the cans and cardboard boxes it came in. Most of the food ended up on the ground. Often they threw it at each other. Sometimes they threw bottles. The place was strewn with glass. And the worst of it was that they had no right to be there. They weren't hotel guests. The manager should have seen them off months ago, but he was weak.*

There is a kind of story our British brothers and sisters write wonderfully well. It's hard to define, but "Vandals" itself can serve as a definition. The story originally appeared in England last year in Woman's Own Magazine . . .

VANDALS

by PETER LOVESEY

Miss Parmener disliked the young man on sight. He shocked her. She took it as a personal offense that he stood at her door in a black leather jacket, faded blue-denim trousers, and what she had been brought up to think of as tennis shoes.

Of an evening, she had got into the habit of standing at her window and staring down at the courtyard. The hotel brochure described it as the piazza. Piazza! *Pigsty* was nearer the truth ever since the thugs and hooligans had started meeting there in the evenings. They had ruined it. They sat on their motorcycles swilling beer and picking at food from the takeaway shop, and littering the ground with

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the cans and cardboard boxes it came in. Most of the food ended up on the ground. Often they threw it at each other. Sometimes they threw bottles. The place was strewn with broken glass. They had vandalized the walls with words sprayed three or four feet high—the names, she was told, of pop groups they admired. And the worst of it was that they had no right to be there. They weren't hotel guests. The manager should have seen them off months ago, but he was weak. He claimed that he had spoken to them several times.

Now here at her door was this young man dressed no differently from the thugs.

Miss Parmenter wrestled mentally with her fear and inexpectation. She knew she led a cloistered existence at the Ocean View. He was probably a decent young man who happened to favor leather and denim. Perhaps they all did nowadays.

She drew back from the secret eye and drew a long, uneven breath, then rubbed distractedly at her fingernails, pressing back her skin until it hurt. She could easily get rid of him by pretending she was out.

Yet she had waited twenty years for this opportunity. She would not let it pass.

She checked her hair. A wayward strand needed repinning under the coil.

He rang again.

It *had* to be him. There was no reason for anyone else to call.

She slotted the end of the safety-chain into its notch and opened the door the couple of inches it allowed, half hoping she would miraculously find the young man dressed in a three-piece suit and striped tie.

There was no miracle, but at least the jacket looked cleaner than some she had seen.

He grinned. "I'm Paul Yarrow. Not late, am I?"

He had remarkably even teeth. They were so perfect they could have been artificial. Perhaps he wasn't as young as his style of dress suggested. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of large sunglasses.

"Remember?" he said. "I phoned last week."

"Yes."

She thought she had caught a whiff of liquor on his breath. It might have been something else, that aftershave they advertised on television. She tightened her grip on the door. "How do I know who you are?"

He gave a shrug and a smile. "I just said. I'm the guy that phoned."

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"Don't you have a card or something?"

"Sorry."

"Some kind of identification?"

"You'll have to take my word for it."

"I would have thought a firm as highly regarded as yours—"

"I'm not in the firm. I'm kind of, er, freelance, if you see what I mean. They called me up and asked me to do this one. Shall I come in, or would you fancy a drink somewhere?"

She didn't care at all for his manner, but she told herself that it sounded like an educated accent. She really wanted to be convinced. She wanted passionately to go through with this.

She took a deep breath and unfixed the chain. "You had better come in, Mr. Yarrow."

"Cheers."

The tea things were already on the rosewood occasional table in the drawing room. She had only to fetch the teapot from the kitchen where the kettle had been simmering for the last twenty minutes, but she decided against it. She dared not leave him alone in the room.

"Won't you sit down?"

Ignoring the invitation, he crossed the carpet to the corner cupboard and picked up a large stoneware vase. He balanced it in his palm and with his free hand caressed the surface, tracing ripples left by the potter's fingers.

"Fantastic. Fabulous glaze."

"It is rather lovely," Miss Parmenter agreed.

"Must date from after her trip to Japan in1933."

Her skin prickled. "You know who made it?"

"Your sister—who else?"

He knew. The relief was as palpable as rain in tropical heat. For all his unprepossessing appearance, he had demonstrated his right to be there. He knew about pottery, about Maggie's pottery. He was a connoisseur. "I couldn't say which glaze it is," she told him in a rush of words. "She had hundreds—well, dozens, anyway. She wrote them all down like recipes in a cookery book. She actually called them recipes. This could be anything, anything at all."

"Celadon," said Mr. Yarrow. "It's one of the celadons. The grey-green."

"Really? I believe you could be right, but I couldn't for the life of me tell you what went into it."

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"Feldspar, wood ash, and a small quantity of iron oxide," said Mr. Yarrow.

"You're very well informed."

"That's why I'm here." He replaced the vase. "Shall we get down to business?"

Miss Parmenter said, "I'll get some tea. You will have a cup of tea, Mr. Yarrow?"

"Sure."

She felt she *had* to trust him now, even if she still found it impossible to get those thugs and vandals out of her mind. She was in such a hurry she deliberately omitted to heat the teapot first, a rule she had broken only once or twice in her life. When she carried it—naked, without its cosy—back into the drawing room, Mr. Yarrow had picked up Maggie's pot again.

"Terrific."

"It is a fine example of her work," said Miss Parmenter as she stooped to pour the tea. She had forgotten the strainer. She would break another rule and manage without one.

"No, I was talking about you," said Mr. Yarrow. "Here you are, a little old lady tucked away in a small hotel on the south coast. Once had a famous sister, but she died twenty years ago. Who would have thought—"

"Just a minute," broke in Miss Parmenter. "I may be old, Mr. Yarrow, but little I most certainly am not. Nor am I 'tucked away,' as you put it. There is an hourly train service to London if I want it."

He shook his head and smiled. "We haven't got off to a very good start, have we?"

"If you would be good enough to replace the pot on the shelf, I can hand you a cup of tea."

"Right."

"Sugar?"

"No. Do you mind if I try again? Your sister had an international reputation as a potter. She traveled the world. She worked with the greatest potters of the Twentieth Century, people like Hamada and Bernard Leach."

"I met them."

"I'm sure you did, but it must have been hell to have been the sister of Margaret Parmenter."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, did you ever travel abroad like her?"

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"No."

"Were you ever called a genius?"

"Mr. Yarrow, I don't know where this is leading, but I find it intrusive and embarrassing."

"I'm trying to pay you a compliment, Miss Parmenter. You have to be a pretty exceptional lady to go to all the trouble you have to keep your sister's name before the public, considering you had no talent of your own. That's what I call selflessness."

"Oh, nonsense," murmured Miss Parmenter, looking coyly into her cup.

"Not at all. Come clean with me. Didn't you ever feel a twinge of envy?"

She looked up and regarded him steadily. "You must understand, Mr. Yarrow, that I was brought up to love and respect my sister and all my family. Father believed in certain principles that I am afraid are neglected by the modern generation of parents."

"Old-fashioned values?"

"I've heard them called that. I've heard it said that we were repressed, presumably because we didn't go about in gangs, terrifying people. If we needed to express ourselves, we learned to do it creatively, like my sister."

"How about you?" asked Mr. Yarrow. "Did you do anything creative?"

"I would rather not talk about myself."

"You weren't motivated?"

"I didn't have the opportunity. Mother died when I was twenty, so I had to manage the home and care for Father."

"Ah, the parent trap," said Mr. Yarrow. "The unmarried daughter caring for the aged parent."

Miss Parmenter set down her cup and saucer. She was so irritated that she feared she might snap the handle from the cup. "Mr. Yarrow, I don't know whether that remark was intended to be sympathetic. If so, it was misplaced. I was pleased and privileged to be able to look after my father for over thirty years. The fact that I chose to remain unmarried is immaterial. I have nothing to hide from you or anyone else, but I will not have my life dissected by a total stranger who knows nothing about it. Nothing."

"Easy," said Mr. Yarrow, as if he were speaking to a dangerous animal. "You did invite me here, remember?"

"I invited the Artemis Gallery to send a representative with a view to mounting an exhibition."

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"But you didn't bargain for a guy like me who takes a personal interest in the job?"

"I don't mind telling you that I expected someone more—well, more businesslike."

"Pinstripes and bowler?"

"Well—"

"Give me strength," muttered Mr. Yarrow. "Okay, let's do it your way. What have you got to show me?"

Miss Parmenter folded her arms and sat back in her chair. "In a moment. First, how much do you know about my sister's career?"

"Enough. The Royal College. The two years with Hamada in Japan. Those elegant tall pots in the palest wood-ash glazes she produced right through the Forties and Fifties."

"How any have you seen?"

"Not many," he admitted. "Most of them went into private collections."

"At least you're honest."

"Thank you for that. The few I've seen are knockouts." He added for her benefit, "Exquisite."

"I like honesty," Miss Parmenter observed. "If my generation had a fault, it was putting too much stress on being tactful, sometimes at the expense of the truth. Young people are not so sensitive about what they say. They can be hurtful, but at least they are honest. I would like you to be honest with me."

"It's okay. I was a boy scout."

She stood, picked up the tray, and carried it toward the door. "There's no need to be facetious."

He followed her to the door and reached for the handle. "Miss Parmenter, I was trying to make a point. You don't have to treat me like a kid."

She laughed. She could hardly believe that she was actually laughing, but she was. The funny thing was that he was right. She was treating him like a child. She wasn't in the least afraid of him. And this was the man she had almost refused to admit because of the intimidating clothes he wore.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing you would understand."

"Shall I take the tray?"

"No, I can manage, thank you. But come with me." She was distinctly enjoying this. Her moment was approaching, and she in-

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tended to savor it. She carried the tea things through the kitchen and set them down. She felt supremely confident.

She stood in her kitchen and emptied the teapot and said, without looking at him, "Do you know what I've been doing since Father died?"

"Tracking down your sister's pots?"

"Yes. Maggie was very meticulous. She kept a record of each one, who bought it, what they paid and when. Some have changed hands several times since then, and a few have suffered accidents, unfortunately, but I think I can account for every one."

"Useful."

"Some people simply refuse to sell, of course."

"To *sell?* You buy the pots back?"

"I offer a very fair price. Since Father died, I have not been short of money. Altogether, I have reclaimed over seventy pots."

"Why? What did you do it for?"

"For this."

"This?"

"The exhibition."

Mr. Yarrow was rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't understand. You don't have to repossess all the pots to put them on show. People are usually willing to loan them."

She smiled again. "You obviously think I'm soft in the head, or whatever the current expression is."

"I just think it's a hell of an expensive way to put on an exhibition. Okay, it's a terrific tribute to your sister, but where does it leave you? On the breadline, if I know anything about the value of those pots. Even if we go ahead with the show, I can't guarantee that you'll get your money back."

"The money doesn't interest me."

"They charge a commission on anything they sell."

Miss Parmenter scarcely heard him. She said, "I think you should see the collection now."

"Try and stop me," said Mr. Yarrow.

"You promise to give your honest opinion?"

"You can rely on me."

"Come this way, then." She led him out of the kitchen and through the passage to a door at the end. She stepped aside. "You may open it and go in."

Mr. Yarrow stepped into the room.

Miss Parmenter waited outside, smiling to herself. "Take as long

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as you like," she called out. "After all, there's a lifetime of work in there."

A lifetime—and more. An old tune was going through her head. Something Father had often whistled when he was in a good mood, one of those mornings when a letter arrived. *"It's from our Maggie, and bless me if she hasn't sold another pot. Isn't she the cat's whiskers?"*

A pity Father couldn't have lived to see what his other, disregarded daughter had finally achieved. Or Maggie herself, the brilliant, celebrated Maggie. Wouldn't *she* have been astonished!

A step! Mr. Yarrow was coming out!

He had taken off his sunglasses. He had blue eyes and they were open extraordinarily wide, as they should have been after what they had just seen.

She was so anxious that she almost reached out to touch him. "Well?"

He fiddled with the collar of his shirt. "I'm—lost for words."

Miss Parmenter gave a nervous laugh. "I expect you are, but tell me what you think."

With a shrug, he said, "I'm just amazed, that's all."

"I knew you would be. But you like it, don't you?"

He turned his eyes aside. "It's an incredible thing to have done. Years of work, I'm sure."

"I want to know," she told him. "You promised to be frank with me."

"Right." He rubbed his arms as if he suddenly felt a draught of cold air. "Shall we go through to your sitting room?"

"If you wish—but you *will* be honest?"

Seated in the armchair, he said, "Are they all your sister's pots?"

"Yes. I told you."

"And the shells—did you collect them yourself?"

"Every morning from the beach, very early, before anyone else was about."

"There must be millions."

"I expect so. I had to use the tiny shells, you see. Big ones wouldn't have done at all. And they all had to be sorted into shapes and colors before I could use them."

"I'm sure," said Mr. Yarrow. "How did you fix them to the surface of the pots?"

"A tile cement. Very strong. There's no fear of them falling off, if that is what you're thinking."

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"Where did you get the idea?"

She chuckled into her handkerchief. "Actually, from one of the souvenir shops on the way to the beach. They have all sorts of things decorated with shells. Table lamps, ashtrays, little boxes. Crudely done, of course. You couldn't call it art."

"So you took it upon yourself to buy back every pot your sister ever made and cover them all with seashells."

"*Decorate* them. My designs are very intricate, as I'm sure you appreciate. I have some ideas for the exhibition catalogue, if you are interested. For the cover, I think a close-up photograph of one of the pots, and in white lettering *Margaret and Cecily Parmenter.*"

Mr. Yarrow got up and crossed to the corner cupboard. "You missed one." He picked up the vase he had handled before and rotated it slowly, looking at the glaze. "Why did you leave this one?"

"This?" She took it from him. "Because it's the only one that belonged to me. She gave it to me."

"So it was allowed to escape."

Miss Parmenter hesitated. "Escape?"

His voice changed. There was something in it that made Miss Parmenter go cold. "You wanted the truth," he told her. "You've ruined those pots. You've destroyed the glaze, the line, the tactile quality, everything. They are no longer works of art."

She stared at him, unable to find words.

He replaced his sunglasses. "I think I'd better leave. All I can say is that you must have hated that sister of yours." He started toward the door.

Miss Parmenter still had the vase in her hands. She lifted it high and crashed it onto the back of Mr. Yarrow's skull.

He fell without a sound. Blood flowed across the rosewood table, coloring the splinters of stoneware scattered over its surface.

She went to the cupboard in the kitchen where she kept her sleeping tablets. She swallowed two handfuls and washed them down with water.

Then she went into the room where the pots were ranged on shelves. She opened the window and started dropping them slowly into the courtyard among the empty beercans.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Ganelon I story by

JAMES POWELL

A descendant of Marc-Antoine Prattmann, the greatest of all makers of woodwind instruments, the dream dowser inherited a masterwork of an oboe known to the musical world as the Black Emperor. Ganelon desired above all else to possess this instrument . . .

THE BRIDGE OF TRADED DREAMS

by JAMES POWELL

Europe will long remember the dream mania of 1869. The year opened with the publication of Charcot's brilliant *Dream Baedecker,* which guided an entire generation through the terra incognita of the Land of Nod. And it closed with the final curtain descending on Scalamandre's much unappreciated ballet "The Haunted Bird of Sleep." In between, in every household or boulevard café, the day's first order of business was the telling of one's adventures in the valley of slumber the night before. When Europe finally did get around to unfolding its morning newspapers, it was to read of the dreams of the famous.

In Paris, plush perfumed dreameries sprang up, sumptuous rentable alcoves for afternoon naps. In Milan, the dictators of fashion plundered the bed chamber to send the well dressed into the streets like sleepwalkers in pajamalike suits and nightgownlike gowns. In Stockholm, a political party called the Night Caps sprang to the fore, while London's Harley Street spun out a whole new school of premonitory medicine using dream interpretation based on one brief sentence in Hobbes' *Leviathan.* ("And seeing dreams are caused by

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the distemper of the inward parts of the Body, divers distempers must needs cause different Dreams.")

In San Sebastiano, the great detective Ambrose Ganelon threw his famous jaundiced eye on the craze only long enough to determine that his nemesis, the evil genius Dr. Ludwig Fong, was not behind it. He did not consider the dream mania again until June when Felicien de Prattmann arrived back in the Principality.

Prattmann (the "de" was affectation) had begun the year as a ghost dreamer, inventing imaginative dreams for the dull to recount as their own. But he quickly won a reputation throughout Europe as a dream dowser, one who uses people's night phantasms to help them discover lost articles or hidden treasure. Nor was he reluctant to demand his rightful share of recovered valuables. Once, the story goes, he urged a client who dreamed of an egg buried beneath a certain tree to dig there. The man discovered a lost trove of silver and gold. But when he brought some of the silver to Prattmann as a reward, the dream dowser was not above remarking that he'd like a bit of the yolk as well.

A descendant of Marc-Antoine Prattmann, the greatest of all makers of woodwind instruments, the dream dowser inherited a masterwork of an oboe known to the musical world as the Black Emperor. Ganelon desired above all else to possess this instrument, which as a family heirloom was not for sale. But young Prattmann had a weakness. He was an avid collector of baroque eggcups of the Wurtemburger school. Ganelon was sure Prattmann would trade the oboe for the two remaining eggcups of the famous Ravenburg set, which had been scattered across Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. Using his staff of operatives, Ganelon found and purchased one of the cups and picked up a trail that led to its mate. But his people arrived at the small Marseilles antique shop a day after the second cup was purchased by an Englishman, a professor of mathematics, on a vacation walking tour. "Damnable eaters of soft-boiled eggs, the English!" Ganelon had raged. But on reflection, he decided one eggcup might be sufficient if he played his man well.

Now Madame, as everyone called Madame Ganelon, was constantly urging him to invite people to share their table. For his part, Ganelon held that if one was going to fill one's dining room with strangers one might as well eat out. And he seldom cared to eat out. But in this case he decided he needed the help of Madame's excellent cooking. He opened his Prattmann campaign by inviting the young man to dinner.

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Unfortunately, Prattmann interpreted this to mean Ganelon was interested in dreams. He rattled on about his work, much too full of himself to realize that Ganelon preferred to dominate the talk at his own table. By the end of the meal, the host's pasted smile had gone awry and Madame was happy to flee the table to leave them to brandy and cigars.

As Prattmann ended a long description of Egyptian dream lore and a particular belief under the pharoahs that a dream could be transmitted into a sleeper's mind by writing it out and feeding the papyrus to a cat, Ganelon began to savor the immediate pleasure of throwing the young man down the stairs. But then Prattmann said, "Personally, I believe some dreams are clews leading back to deep, forgotten, or perhaps even repressed memories. Whatever it is I help a client find, whether treasure, deed, or will, he already knows where it is. But he doesn't know he knows. As a very young child, he may have heard a parent or a grandparent speak of buried valuables. Or seen someone hide something behind a sliding panel. Or slip something into a book to mark a place. I believe a dream is memory trying to force its way to the surface again."

Ganelon grunted. Surely that was the most intelligent thing the young man had said all night.

"But my theory has been shaken by a recent client," said Prattmann. "May I tell you about his dream?"

Ganelon scowled through his cigar smoke, suspecting he was being led into a trap, but he signaled permission.

"On a recent trip to London, I had among my clients a straightforward-looking fellow in his fifties named Swaffham, who told me quite an extraordinary dream," said Prattmann. "The man found himself standing at one end of a stone bridge of the Gothic style thrown across a river that divided a crowded city. The bridge was lined on either side with a jumble of small two- or three-story shops of the same material which overhung a narrow passageway busy with people in costumes of another time. He suspected they were not English. As he stood watching this scene, a voice said, 'Return here at high noon until you learn something to your profit.' So compelling was this dream that he would have obeyed it on waking, but neither he nor his friends knew where such a bridge existed." Prattmann laughed.

"And of course you told him he was describing our own Bridge Saint Eloi," said Ganelon. For centuries the shops on the bridge sheltered the Principality's sword- and knife-making guilds and re-

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lated crafts. In recent years the trade was mostly in souvenir letter-openers and novelty pocket knives.

"But here's the amazing thing," said Prattmann. "He'd never in his life visited San Sebastiano."

Ganelon shrugged. "I wager his dream was in black and white, and he saw the bridge from the vantage of the southwest corner through Traitor's Gate." This was the ancient bridge gate where once were displayed the severed heads of those executed for treason.

When the bewildered Prattmann acknowledged this, Ganelon said, "Then perhaps your original explanation will serve, after all. I suggest that without realizing it, your man was remembering that etching Banville did for Babelon's novel *The Master Scabbard-Maker's Daughter.*" In the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century, Joseph-Marie Babelon (1775–1833) had placed the Principality in the forefront of the romantic movement with an output of novels that included *The Black Abbot, The Lord of the Sewer Gondoliers, The Spectre Brother-in-Law,* and *The Man in the Iron Boot. The Master Scabbard-Maker's Daughter* was set on and about the Bridge St. Eloi and involved a prince of San Sebastiano in disguise and a master craftsman's beautiful, chaste daughter.

"Ah, but there's more," insisted Prattmann quickly. "I urged Mr. Swaffham to come here as soon as his affairs would permit. And he promised me my share should his visit prove profitable. I thought no more about it until a week ago when he appeared at my hotel in Paris in a state of great excitement. He told me he had just come back from San Sebastiano where he'd stood on the bridge at high noon as instructed by his dream. At last a man whom he'd noticed watching him curiously for several days from a shop doorway approached to ask in labored English why Swaffham came to stand there every day. When the Englishman explained his reason for traveling all the way from England, the man began to laugh.

" 'Dreams are all the rage, my dear sir,' he smiled. 'But how can a man make a living chasing across Europe after chimeras? I dream, too. In fact, last night I dreamed I found myself on a knoll where there were six tall stones erected in a circle. At the bottom of the knoll was a seventh stone as tall as the others, standing on the bank of a small river. And somehow I knew that if I dug at the foot of that seventh stone I would find a treasure.' The man chuckled. 'But even if I knew where those stones were, I assure you I would not close up shop on the say-so of a dream.' Here the man gave Swaffham

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a look that was half pity and half amusement and, turning on his heels, went back into his shop.

"Now Mr. Swaffham stood there dumbfounded, for just outside of his own village of Briggston was a knoll with a circle of six stones called the Whispering Knights because they were canted toward the center like conspirators. And there was a seventh stone called the Dry Knight because it looked like he'd come down to the river Wye for a drink. Mr. Swaffham was on his way back home to dig for treasure when he stopped to give me the good news."

Prattmann paused to add weight to what he was about to say. "My theory of buried memory cannot account for this meeting of two men—of two dreams, if you wish. I was hoping you might be able to provide a down-to-earth explanation for this extraordinary incident." Prattmann waited for a moment as though expecting the detective to speak. But Ganelon had no explanation to give. His face clouded over, his ears began to redden, and his fingers drummed on the table like the ominous tattoo of an approaching army.

Prattmann gave a self-satisfied little smile. "Well, then, perhaps there is more to dreams than meets the eye," he said at last. "What, for example, of the story of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, who, dreaming himself a butterfly, woke to wonder: was he dreaming himself the butterfly or was the butterfly dreaming himself to be Chuang Tzu?"

Ganelon came around the table with the dark look that had earned him the nickname the Ghengis Khan of detection. Without a word, he plucked the cigar from his startled guest's lips and the brandy glass from his fingers and threw them into the fireplace. "Claptrap, sir. Utter, utter claptrap," he growled. Then he indicated the direction to the front door with a toss of his head. "I bid you good evening."

That night Ganelon sat up late in bed, eating a nightcap wedge of deliquescent cheese and mourning the loss of the cherished oboe. Still, a civilized man can only put up with a certain amount of drivel without bursting out. Butterflies and Chinamen, Chinamen and butterflies, and one man's dream that fits neatly into another. Ganelon snorted sourly. Then he looked over quickly to see if he had disturbed Madame, the large shape asleep beneath the covers at his side. It was not an unfriendly glance. They had married for reasons other than love—she afraid of becoming an old maid, he because Prince Faustus was pressing for an heir to carry on the work of the

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detective agency. But a kind of affection had grown up between them.

Ganelon turned back to his cheese for a moment. Then, with a final sigh for the lost Black Emperor, he slipped the plate and its remains into the drawer of the bedside table, blew out the candle, and went to sleep.

And he dreamed. He found himself in total darkness on enemy ground, for he sensed danger all around him. Even the darkness was the enemy's. He could not pierce it, yet he felt visible. Suddenly, two small pale-blue globes set close together appeared ahead of him. When Ganelon moved toward them, the blue globes winked out—to reappear again farther off in the black night. Ganelon allowed himself to be led in this fashion, his reluctance to go on increasing with each step. Then ahead of him stood a circle of tree trunks lit red by the flames of a fire he could not yet see and somehow feared to see. When he tried to stop his progress, he could not—the two blue lights pulled him irresistibly. Finally he cried out—and woke with a start, sitting up in his bed and his own darkness.

For the next several nights, the dream returned. And each time the dream ended with Ganelon closer to the fire than the time before.

But if the dream returned, so did Prattmann.

One afternoon about ten days after the disastrous dinner, old Simon, Ganelon's clerk, ushered Prattmann into the inner office. The young dream dowser was accompanied by a nondescript little Englishman with a short moustache on a long upper lip all atremble with indignation. "You wanted your part of the treasure, sir," Prattmann's companion was saying. "Then come along and share the gallows with me."

"Mr. Ganelon, allow me to introduce Mr. Swaffham," said Prattmann. "I spoke of his case at our recent dinner from which I was so abruptly, ah, called away."

Ganelon gave what was for him a cordial bow. "Please be seated, gentlemen," said the detective, who always took a particular pleasure in shaping his mouth to speak the English tongue, the only language in which he had uttered words of love. "You are a railroad station master, Mr. Swaffham," he observed, sitting back down behind his heavy black desk—whose legs were gilt replicas of the Place Vendome column topped at desk level by miniature Napoleons.

"As Mr. Prattmann no doubt told you, sir."

"He neglected to do so," said the detective. "But the leather-edged

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watch pocket in your vest and the sturdy steel chain suggests a professional preoccupation with time. The scorched patch on the underside of your shirtcuff announces that you carry a kerosene lantern in your work. A railroad man is not too great a leap. And your white shirt leads me to station master."

The Englishman was visibly impressed.

Prattmann said, "A complication's arisen in the matter of Mr. Swaffham's dream. I have advised him to place the matter in your capable hands." An impatient noise from the Englishman prompted him to add, "I, of course, will pay your fee myself."

Ganelon almost smiled. "I'm sure we can work out a satisfactory price," he said smoothly. Then he turned to the station master. "Now, sir, what's all this talk about the gallows?"

Without any more prompting, the station master told how he had arrived back at Briggston by a late-afternoon train and curbed his curiosity about the treasure under the Dry Knight until nightfall. Then, with a small shovel and a lantern concealed in a sack, he set out for the Wye as if on an innocent evening stroll. ("Some who saw me said I skulked," said Swaffham. "But they lie. I strolled. I whistled.")

By the time he reached the river, the air had taken on the water's coolness and the fireflies were haunting the grass. Beneath the tall rock, the ground was sunbaked and weedy. He lit the lantern and set about his task. Two feet down, the shovel struck something. But what he hoped to be a moneybag turned out to be a jacket. He had uncovered the remains of a man long dead.

Suddenly, a basset voice said, "Evening, Mr. Swaffham. And what might you be up to?" Twigg, the village constable, stepped out of the bushes along the shore with two twitching fish on a string. "Here, now," he growled, peering down into the hole at the corpse of Captain Amos Pendry of Pendry Hall, who had vanished from the district three years before. The next thing Swaffham knew, he was being led away with talk of murder in the air.

"I am pleased you are not one of those with limp powers of recollection, Mr. Swaffham," said Ganelon. "Please tell me about this Captain Pendry and his disappearance."

Swaffham explained that three years before, the well-to-do landowner and sportsman had set out on horseback on a business trip to a neighboring county. Later that same morning, a reputable witness saw him on a country road about seven miles away, dismounted in the shade and deep in brooding thought. As the witness passed,

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Pendry consulted his watch as though waiting for someone. No one ever set eyes on him alive again.

"Some said amnesia," explained Swaffham. "Others spoke of foul play, for there was talk of ruffians in the area. Later, when the Captain's strongbox was discovered to be empty of all money and valuables, many concluded he'd run off to make a new life for himself. Perhaps with another woman. But I never held with that."

"Why not?" demanded Ganelon.

"No more than a year before his death, Captain Pendry had courted and won the hand of Miss Venetia Bland, the new governess of the Earl of Eskdale's daughters," explained Swaffham. "In doing so, he had also triumphed over another suitor for the young woman's affection—a personal rival, Sir Blundell Crabbet, the Earl's younger brother. Sir Blundell is a world traveler of some reputation, the first infidel to ever smuggle himself into the Forbidden Mosque of the Sacred City of Ohm—perhaps you've read his book.

"Anyway, to answer your question, it was clear to me that Captain Pendry was totally captivated by his new bride, a yellow-haired, black-eyed-susan of a woman. She had come to the castle highly recommended and I have no doubt left many a broken heart behind her in the neighborhood of Khyber Cottage, Blackheath, her previous position. The new Mrs. Pendry sprang from very handsome stock. Her brother, Mr. Reginald Bland, who came frequently to visit, was good-looking enough to be an actor with a company that toured the provinces. No, I don't think Captain Pendry was about to run off with another woman."

"Tell me about this rivalry between Captain Pendry and Sir Blundell Crabbet," Ganelon said.

Swaffham explained that previous to Miss Bland's arrival, Sir Blundell had squandered his small inheritance gambling, and then further harmed himself in the eyes of the Earl, on whom he was now dependent, by betting on sporting events with Captain Pendry on credit, using the Eskdale cameo as collateral. This famous green-and-black cameo, depicting the profiles of the first Earl Eskdale and his wife, Lady Honoria, was a gift from King James the First. Captain Pendry did not dispose of the cameo, though he had every right to do. But he refused to return it until he was repaid with interest. When the Captain's solicitor broke into the strongbox, the cameo had not been there.

Ganelon heard all this and sat in thought for a moment. Then he said, "Let us turn back a bit to your own situation, Mr. Swaffham.

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What do the authorities believe would prompt you to dig up the body of the man you had murdered three years before?"

"A year ago, while Sir Blundell was with Admiral Denison's expedition up the Amazon, his brother the Earl perished in the sinking of the *Calpurnia* in the Gulf of Lyons," said Swaffham. "Since he died without male issue, the title and the estate passed to Sir Blundell. When Sir Blundell returned to Briggston, it was clear his feelings toward Mrs. Pendry had not changed. The first thing he did was offer a substantial reward for information leading to Captain Pendry's whereabouts, dead or alive. Clearly, if Captain Pendry was dead he intended to offer Venetia Pendry his hand in marriage."

"And just when was this reward offered?"

"The middle of April," said Swaffham.

"And when did you have this dream of yours?"

"The beginning of May," said Swaffham. "I've had many a pint retelling it at the Chalk and Cheese since then. And many another telling how I learned of the whereabouts of my dream bridge. I never thought it would make me the principal suspect in a murder investigation. I arrived back here this morning intent on finding that fellow I'd spoken to and having him make a statement on my behalf."

"But you couldn't find him," said Ganelon.

"Correct," admitted Swaffham. "The real shopkeeper, who must spend all his time river-fishing out a back window with a long line, did vaguely recall a customer fitting his description who came to browse among the wares up front. Of average height and build, my man had a swarthy complexion, a full beard, and a large mole under the left eye."

"By taking off his jacket and standing in the doorway, a browser becomes an inquisitive shopkeeper with a dream to trade," said Ganelon. "So much for the supernatural, my dear Prattmann. However, we now know Captain Pendry wasn't murdered during a robbery. A random killer would have nothing to gain by leading someone else to the discovery of the body."

Prattmann spoke up. "What about Sir Blundell? Suppose he lured Pendry to a meeting on the pretext of redeeming the cameo, killed him, and recovered the family treasure. Now he needs to have the body found so he can marry Pendry's widow."

Ganelon turned a quizzical eye on the station master.

"The murdered man was last seen at eight-ten," said Swaffham. "Sir Blundell left that same morning on the nine-twenty train. He arrived with his horse in a great lather and asked me to return it

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to the castle, saying he'd just received a letter inviting him to take the place of a member of Admiral Denison's expedition who'd fallen ill on the eve of departure. The same train that carried Sir Blundell away brought Mrs. Pendry's brother, Mr. Bland. Pendry Hall's situation was isolated and Mrs. Pendry was uneasy about being there alone. When he traveled on business, the Captain often arranged to have her brother stay at the hall. Mr. Bland and Sir Blundell exchanged frosty bows on the platform, for in the contest for the young lady's heart Mr. Bland had been a strong partisan of Captain Pendry.

"But wouldn't Sir Blundell have had enough time to do the dirty deed and catch his train?" insisted Prattmann.

"But why bring the body back seven miles and bury it at the Dry Knight?" demanded Ganelon. "Why wouldn't the killer bury him where he struck him down?"

"Then it's this Bland fellow," said Prattmann. "Riding like the devil, he could have caught up with Captain Pendry on the road. An actor would certainly know how to disguise himself to deceive Mr. Swaffham on the bridge."

"Again, why bring the body back seven miles?" Ganelon asked him.

"When it comes to that, the man on the bridge could have been Mr. Bland or Sir Blundell," said the station master. "Anyone who could smuggle himself into the Forbidden Mosque of the Sacred City of Ohm would have to be something of a master of disguise, too."

Ganelon reached for the bell-cord. In a moment, old Simon was standing in front of his desk. "Do we have a man in England at the moment?" the great detective wondered.

"Colbert, sir," replied the ancient clerk. "Regarding the matter of the Rothstein Lavalliere."

"Colbert?" said Ganelon vaguely, scribbling something on a piece of paper.

Old Simon pulled at his nose with a clutch of fingers as if to elongate it and made his ears big by putting the palms of his hands behind them.

"Ah, yes," remembered Ganelon. He handed over the paper he had been writing on. "Send Colbert this telegraphic communication. We will get a letter off to him tonight with fuller instructions." When Simon left the inner office, Ganelon said, "Gentlemen, I know who killed Captain Pendry. But to prove it to the authorities is another

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matter. For that, Mr. Swaffham here must return home and have another dream."

Within the week Ganelon had received a letter from Mr. Swaffham describing the events that took place on his return to Briggston. He had gone at once to Eskdale Castle, where Sir Blundell received him coolly. "I hope this isn't about the reward, Swaffham," he declared. "I've no intention of acting in that direction until the court has exonerated you of any part in damned Pendry's murder. Being led to the body by a dream is a bit much, after all."

"I do expect considerable legal expenses in the matter, my lord," said the station master. "That set me wondering if there might not be another reward for the whereabouts of the Eskdale cameo. One payable on recovery."

"Not another dream, Swaffham?" demanded the master of Eskdale Castle skeptically.

"It told me where to dig, my lord."

Sir Blundell's eyes took on a calculating cast. "Two hundred pounds," he declared.

"Guineas," insisted Swaffham. "And I'll take you to the spot tomorrow at dawn."

"Guineas, then," said Sir Blundell stiffly. "But the police-inspector fellow from London must be along."

"As a matter of fact, I just saw Inspector Blossom going into the Chalk and Cheese with Mr. Bland," said the station master. "If you like, I'll drive you there and we can make the arrangements."

They found the Inspector and Reginald Bland drinking brandy and water in the gentlemen's saloon before the blue flames of a coal fire burning behind the grate. They were deep in a discussion of modern thespians, for Blossom admitted himself to be an addict of the labors of former days, of Edmund Kean and Charles Kemble.

When Sir Blundell explained why they had come, Reginald Bland said with weary amusement, "Surely we've had enough of Mr. Swaffham's dreams."

With a quick wink, Sir Blundell said, "A word with you, my dear fellow. And with you, too, Inspector. You'll excuse us, won't you, Swaffham?" He led Bland and Inspector Blossom into a corner, where they held an animated discussion in whispers, with many glances back over their shoulders at the station master.

When they returned, Inspector Blossom eyed Swaffham severely. "This dream of yours if you please, Mr. Swaffham."

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"All right," said Swaffham. "I dreamed I was standing at night on a hill when six men in full armor stepped out of the darkness and closed in on me from all sides. Joints clashing, six arms pointed down to where I was standing and six ghostly whispers urged, 'Dig there and you will discover the first Earl and his lady.'"

At dawn the next morning, the four men gathered together inside the ancient ring of stones called the Whispering Knights on the knoll above the Wye. The blade of Swaffham's spade grated against the earth beneath his instep. The morning was clear and bright, his companions quiet and expectant. After five minutes' digging, there came the sound of metal against metal. The station master drew a cheap tin cigarette-case from the dirt and passed it to Inspector Blossom. The policeman pried open the lid. Inside, wrapped in a square of chamois leather, lay the celebrated green-and-black cameo.

Dark with outrage, Sir Blundell said, "In his greed, the murderer has convicted himself! One dream relating to Pendry's murder might be a coincidence. But we agreed last night that two would point an indelible finger of guilt in any court of law. Inspector, do your sworn duty."

Inspector Blossom nodded. "Mr. Reginald Bland," he intoned, "I arrest you for the murder of Captain Amos Pendry."

"Good God, man!" shouted Sir Blundell. "Not Bland. Swaffham here! He robbed and killed Pendry. When I offered the reward, he dug him up again. Now he's done the same for the cameo. Can't you get that through your head?"

"I beg to differ, my lord," said Inspector Blossom. "Mr. Bland buried the cameo last night with Constable Twigg and myself watching from the shadows. Mr. Bland, you must come with me, sir. You have fallen into a trap prepared for you by Mr. Ambrose Ganelon himself."

"Who the devil's that?" demanded the mystified Sir Blundell.

"Only the idol of every detective in the civilized world," said Inspector Blossom. "The most famous, the most—"

When Prattmann leaned forward as if to try to read this part of the letter himself, Ganelon quickly folded the page and stuffed it back into its envelope.

"No need to continue with Mr. Swaffham's description of events. Sufficient to say that Bland hoped to fix Pendry's murder on Swaffham once and for all by burying the cameo where our little concocted dream said it would be. Yes, it had to be Bland. Captain

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Pendry was last seen seven miles from Briggston. But his body was found just outside of town. Neither suspect had any earthly reason to bring the body back. So Captain Pendry came back himself. In fact, he hadn't been waiting for anyone by the side of the road. He had been waiting for Bland's train."

"But why did Bland kill his brother-in-law?"

Ganelon took up two foolscap sheets pinned together. "It's all here in this report from my man." The detective consulted the bottom of the second page, frowned, and said, "Colbert?" When Prattmann mimicked old Simon's gestures indicating a long nose and big ears, Ganelon said, "Ah, yes." Spreading out the long sheets of paper he began to read aloud.

On receiving Ganelon's instructions, Colbert had made inquiries and discovered that Khyber Cottage, Blackheath, was the address of a Mrs. Marston Woodward. He then proceeded to that suburb by boat to Greenwich and then by cab to the street in question. The residence was substantial and the neighborhood a prosperous one. But the house appeared to have been closed up for some time.

As Colbert stood at the front door wondering what to do next, he was approached by a maid from the house across the street, who asked respectfully if he was with the police. "Not with the British police," answered Colbert. The maid conveyed this canny reply to her mistress and returned with an invitation for him to step across the street.

Colbert was ushered into an elegant parlor, where a white-haired little ramrod of a woman in mauve taffeta was waiting to receive him. "Am I to understand, then, that Mrs. Woodward has carried her activities abroad?" she asked without ado and in some agitation.

This intriguing question prompted Colbert to tell the woman the entire story. As he spoke, she turned pale, and when he told of the death of Captain Pendry she was visibly staggered. When he had finished, she raised a hand to ask for a moment to compose herself. Then she said,

"Several years ago, I brought into this house a well recommended young woman as governess to my orphaned grandchildren. She was clearly intelligent and seemed of good character and dedication. Her brother, a young man of the cloth, was a frequent visitor here, for they were very close—a fact made all the more poignant because he was preparing himself for the Indian missions and soon would not see her again for years, if ever.

"Now coincidentally, or so I thought, my neighbor across the street

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had just returned from a twenty-year stay in Calcutta. Marston Woodward was a childless widower in comfortable circumstances. Several times I invited him to my house so that brother and sister could hear at first hand of the distant vineyard to which the young man had chosen to devote his life. This acquaintanceship between my neighbor and my governess blossomed, and within the year she had left me to become Mrs. Marston Woodward, mistress of Khyber Cottage.

"For the next year and a half, our relationship remained cordial. But then Mr. Woodward seemed to have a return of the illness which had obliged him to retire from the Indian service. In spite of his wife's devoted ministrations, he passed from the human scene. Abruptly, Mrs. Woodward's attitude toward me changed. The cordiality was replaced by a vague politeness. It was as if—how shall I put it?—as if I was no longer a piece on her game-board."

Here the maid arrived with tea. The lady of the house poured Colbert's cup with trembling hands. When they had both tasted their tea, the woman continued her story.

"Not long after this mystifying change in Mrs. Woodward's attitude, I left on a tour of the Lake District, during which I made the acquaintance of an officer from my late husband's regiment and his wife, who lived in Clampton Regis, which, as it happened, was where Mrs. Woodward had worked as governess before she came to me. I asked them if they knew Mrs. Briscoe, her employer, with whom I had had correspondence on the matter of recommendations. They seemed mystified, for, though Mrs. Briscoe had moved from the district, they knew the young widow in question and she had no children.

"Then they told me how she had originally come to the neighborhood as governess to a local family and married Captain Briscoe, a retired naval officer. She had met him through her brother, a student of naval history who was preparing a chronicle of the blockade of Sevastapol in which the Captain had participated. Not long after the wedding, the Captain had perished in a tragic sailing accident, knocked overboard by a swinging boom before the eyes of his horrified bride and brother-in-law. Need I tell you my growing suspicions as I returned homeward, or my apprehension when I discovered Mrs. Woodward had put the house up for sale and moved away?

"Now my man John had helped the cab man load a trunk to take to the railroad station, and being something of a pry he had noted the name and destination—'Miss Venetia Bland, Eskdale Castle,

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Briggston.' Were the fatal governess and her chameleon brother stalking their next victim? Or was the whole thing my imagination? After all, as my solicitor had been quick to point out, what proof could I bring to the authorities? A boating accident? The death of a man already in poor health? And he strongly suggested that, under our country's libel laws, any action I took that failed might threaten my grandchildren's inheritance. In short, he told a coward everything she wanted to hear.

"To salve my conscience, I subscribed to the Briggston *Bugle-Register*, telling myself that I was monitoring Mrs. Woodward's activities from afar. It was in those pages that I read of her marriage to Captain Amos Pendry. This should have driven me to action, but I was still helpless with doubt and the possible consequences. All I did was cancel my subscription to the newspaper and try to put the whole business out of my mind. But I could not. It was a year before I conceived of writing Captain Pendry anonymously, outlining my suspicions and putting him on his guard." She shook her head. "An anonymous letter," she said distastefully. "Heaven help me, I could do no more than that."

Ganelon read ahead under his breath for a bit. Then he set the foolscap aside. "There's nothing more there for us. His suspicions aroused by the woman's letter, Captain Pendry decides to set a trap with his little business trip. He drives several miles out of town and waits for Bland's train. Then he returns home by side roads. Who knows what shape the confrontation took? Captain Pendry is struck down and killed. His murderers decide to make it look like Captain Pendry has run off. Using his key, they clean out his strongbox and bury the body by night. After seven years they will go through the process of having him declared legally dead and Venetia Pendry will inherit his estate. It isn't as long as it sounds. They have each other, after all. And I think investigation will prove them something more than brother and sister.

"But suddenly Sir Blundell returns from the Amazon as the new Earl Eskdale, among the richest noblemen of the realm. And they discover he is still under Mrs. Pendry's spell, quite prepared to marry her were she free to do so. But he is not the kind of man who will wait forever. Unfortunately, they cannot risk leading the police to the body by some anonymous tip, especially after a reward had been offered. Mr. Swaffham's dream must have seemed a gift from heaven. And if one gift, why not two? Oh, I'm sure our second dream made them suspicious. But if the risks of burying the cameo were high,

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so were the rewards. With Swaffham the murderer, the matter of Captain Pendry's death would be settled once and for all and a very desirable marriage could proceed."

Ganelon set Swaffham's letter and Colbert's report aside. "And now to the question of my fee," he said. "In your case, the burden that some call excessive will be a light one, a simple trade. A certain Wurtemburger eggcup in my possession for your glorious ancestor's masterpiece called the Black Emperor."

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" exclaimed the young dream dowser. "A mathematics professor made me exactly the same offer during my recent trip to London. Of course, I jumped at the chance."

Ganelon's indoor pallor turned as grey as death. Averting his eyes, he said hoarsely, "Then I will trade you the damned eggcup for that man's name."

Ganelon lay in the moonlight shadow cast by the shape of Madame beneath the covers beside him. He had been staring up grimly at the ceiling for several hours. But he knew a man cannot live his life dreading a third part of every day. At last, as determinedly as he had fought off sleep, Ganelon relaxed, closed his eyes, and surrendered himself to the dream. It did not keep him waiting.

Ganelon found himself in darkness within the grove of rosy-trunked trees. He was alone. The pair of pale-blue lights that led him there had vanished. He knew now they were the eyes of Fong's Siamese cat Jasmeen, to whom his arch enemy had fed this bitter dream in the Egyptian style. Now the time had come to look down into the fire which cracked at his feet. Yes, there it was. The wood burned as red as raw beef. Something dark and trimmed with silver lay smoldering across the flames. The Black Emperor.

How Fong's laughter rang in the darkness!

When dawn came, Ganelon stuffed his feet into the waiting carpet slippers and wearily made his way downstairs, where he took a ledger bound in green buckram from the secret drawer in his desk. To the list of Dr. Ludwig Fong's English minions, Ganelon added a new name—Professor Moriarty.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Griswold story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

The cryptic message Griswold solves in this charming new puzzle from Isaac Asimov reminds us of something Thomas Wolfe once wrote to Maxwell Perkins at Scribners: "I will go out West, where states are square . . ."

STRAIGHT LINES

by ISAAC ASIMOV

I stretched out luxuriously in my armchair in the library of the Union Club and said, "When I was young, I had a memory like blotting paper. Without actually trying to, I memorized all the maps in my geography books and to this day I retain them in detail. I know all the boundaries, all the capitals, rivers, mountain ranges, and so on, but they're all pre-World War II. I can't do Africa and parts of Asia for that reason."

Baranov said, "If that's your only problem in life, you're not suffering much."

I ignored that. "I used to win bets that I could write down the names of all forty-eight states—forty-eight *then*—in five minutes, or that I could write down every state capital with its state in ten."

"Can you still do it?" said Jennings, sounding only faintly interested.

"Of course," I said, "and I can add Juneau, Alaska, and Honolulu, Hawaii." A bit more cautiously, I added, "I haven't tried it in thirty years or so. I suppose it's conceivable I might miss one or two." Then, my courage reviving: "But I doubt it."

"Did you make much money that way?" asked Jennings.

"I never bet more than a nickel," I said virtuously, "and I was betting on a sure thing."

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"You must have been an insufferable prig when you were young," said Jennings.

"Why not?" said Baranov. "He's insufferable now."

It was at this point that Griswold stirred. He grunted, sipped at his drink, and said, "I think I can match that performance, at least as far as the United States is concerned, and even outdo it."

I said, "Come, come, Griswold, if you think you're going to trap me into one of your bets—"

"Not at all," said Griswold freezingly, "I was merely going to say that an interesting espionage puzzle once rested on just such a point, and I see now that I will be forced to explain."

The matter [said Griswold] came up during the Second World War, when I was a young man on the fringes of the world of spy and counterspy. I was under the wing of one of the grand old hands of that world—Wingate, his name was. He's long since dead, though he died in bed and in comfort, which was not true of many of us.

He told me the story one evening when we were taking a break from our efforts to work out just what the Germans knew, if anything, about our forthcoming landing at Salerno. It was a relief to turn to the simpler days before our entry into the First World War.

In 1916, as it is just possible one or another of you might know, the United States was having trouble with a Mexican revolutionary—well, *we* called him a bandit—named Pancho Villa. He gambled for popular support in Mexico against his Mexican opponents by trying to force the United States to intervene on the side of those opponents.

He did this by killing Americans. In January of that year, he stopped a train in northern Mexico, took off seventeen American engineers, and shot sixteen of them without even bothering to make up a reason. When that didn't do the trick he actually sent four hundred raiders across the American line into the border town of Columbus, New Mexico. They burned the town and killed nineteen Americans.

That got him what he wanted. The United States could under no conditions sit still for that. We forced the Mexican government to grant permission, and a week after Villa's raid we sent six thousand American troops under Black Jack Pershing into Mexico. They penetrated hundreds of miles into the country and kept up the case for nearly a year. The one thing they didn't do, however, was catch Villa.

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Villa, after all, was on his home turf and was swimming through a sea of sympathetic peasants. As week after week and month after month passed without a capture, the United States looked more and more like a paper tiger. Villa grew more and more popular with the Mexican people, and the Mexican government was forced to take on a more and more anti-American stance or it would lose all support. It was a fiasco for the U.S. that ended in February 1917 when a stubborn President Wilson was forced to bow to the inevitable because it was clear to him that we would soon be at war with Germany and have far more important problems on our hands. He recalled Pershing and Villa lived on until 1923 when he was assassinated by a Mexican enemy.

And yet Villa might have been caught fairly early on and things would have worked out well for the American forces because they had an ace operative on their side. He was a young man from across the border who had been an American citizen for the last decade. He was well tanned, he carefully cultivated a Mexican-style moustache, he could speak Mexican Spanish perfectly, and in the proper clothes no one could possibly doubt he was anything but Mexican.

He was a crackerjack scout. If anyone could have found Villa in the jumble of semi-desert hills and ravines in which the American division was trying to find its way, it was this man. He had joined the expedition under the name of Mackenzie Clifford, but few people knew that. To almost everyone, he was only Pedro.

He was a man of amazing skill. He managed to find peasants who for one reason or another were sufficiently anti-Villa to be willing to drop messages in places where they could be found by the proper people. He worked up a chain of helpers, and American soldiers saw him only in apparent accidental encounters during which he spoke only in Spanish and behaved like an ignorant peasant who dared not show openly the hostility he clearly felt. That was necessary. One never knew what eyes were watching, what ears were listening.

Generally he was heard from only by way of messages in cipher. They were mere substitution ciphers—those were simple days and whatever skills Villa and his men might have had, they did not include sophistication in deciphering coded messages. There was one complication, to be sure. There were twenty-six different systems of substitution, each one in itself simple. Each was tied to a letter of the alphabet and the variations for each letter had to be memorized, both by Pedro and by several men in the camp. That was

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better than risking the equivalent of a dictionary on a scrap of paper, which might be lost.

If you began with a key word, and used each letter of the word in turn as representing a particular variety of substitution, you might have a message consisting of, let us say, seven or eight t's in a row that would yet be deciphered into a meaningful word. Naturally, the identity of the key word was all-important and it was periodically changed. Pedro chose them, and in the accidental meetings with him or with some of his Mexican allies there was always some reference to it that seemed innocent.

"I have a brother who lives in Mobile, Senor," someone might say. That would seem to any unauthorized ear to be a natural attempt to curry favor with an armed and possibly dangerous foreign soldier, but it made Alabama the key word.

The key word was always the name of a state. There were forty-eight of them, which made sufficient variety, and they could be referred to with relative innocence and ease. Of course, against any sophisticated enemy the constant use of the name of a state would have been dangerous, but those were simple days.

Pedro managed to slip into camp one night—always a very risky thing. He was hot on the trail of Villa and had pinned him down, he thought, to a particular region. This region he intended to penetrate, and if he could—and stay alive—he might be able to send back a message by a trusted ally, provided *he* stayed alive. The few American soldiers who worked with Pedro—and my friend Wingate was the youngest of them—discussed possible ways of trapping Villa, if he were where Pedro thought he was, but it was clear that everything depended on just which valley he was in at the moment, and this was what Pedro had to find out.

It was only after Pedro had slipped out of camp as dawn was approaching that the soldiers realized he had not given them the key word for his next, all-important message. He might be able to send them the usual roundabout indication, but he might not. He should have told them while he was right there. After some agonized recrimination, it fell to Wingate, as junior man, to take out in pursuit of Pedro and get the information without blowing his cover.

Wingate took off with two enlisted men and, choosing the one decent path in the direction in which Pedro was going, they overtook him on his burro. Pedro looked at them in the dim light with considerable hostility. That hostility probably did not have to be assumed. Any contact with the Yanquis would give grounds for

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suspicion to anyone who might witness the event from the surrounding hills.

Wingate realized this and asked his questions brusquely, as a soldier might of a peon. In his broken Spanish he asked as to the neighboring villages and if there were armed men in the vicinity and if government armies had passed through and whether some key route might exist through the mountains. Some key route, he said, and the word "key" was scarcely emphasized.

Pedro answered sullenly, professing ignorance of even the simplest matters, as a peon might when addressing soldiers. Shrugging, he said, "I do not know how best to go through the mountains. There are many paths, and I stay at home, you understand. I have been told the paths are all straight on every side. I have heard the northernmost of these might be what you want, but I do not know for myself."

Wingate, satisfied, wheeled about and returned to camp. There, he repeated the elliptical utterance.

What Pedro said made no sense, of course, unless you knew what Wingate was after. Pedro spoke in that way with the clear intention of keeping any significance away from any unauthorized eavesdropper. To Wingate and his colleagues, however, it was clear. The key that Pedro intended to use was a state whose boundaries were all straight lines. That meant that any state that was bounded even in part by an ocean or a river or the ridge of a mountain chain was eliminated. When a map was consulted, it was at once clear that forty-five states were thus eliminated. There were only three states all of whose boundaries were straight lines: Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. Of these three states, Wyoming was the northernmost, and so they all agreed that was the key.

Eventually a message arrived from Pedro—a longer one than usual. Everyone was certain that it must contain explicit details on Villa's whereabouts and on the best route to take in order to block his retreat and to trap him.

Pedro himself never returned, nor was his body ever found. The natural assumption was that he had trusted one Mexican too many, had been betrayed, and shot.

At the time the message arrived, however, Wingate and the others didn't know Pedro would never return. If they had had some presentiment of this, moreover, they would have shrugged it off, human nature being what it is. Pedro had known the risks; he was running them for his country; and it was the message that was all-important

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and that had been delivered. A life was a regrettable but not too high price to pay for it.

That is, *if* the message had been of use. As you've probably guessed, since you know the Americans never caught Villa, it proved of no use. Wyoming had been taken as the key, but it was quickly obvious that all it delivered was gibberish.

There was enormous dismay, as you can imagine. Naturally, there was a strong suspicion that Wingate's Spanish did not enable him to tell "northernmost" from "easternmost" or "westernmost." Colorado was the easternmost of the three and Utah was westernmost. They were both tried and both failed. All three gave different decipherings, but they were only three varieties of gibberish.

Then some pointed out that Arizona and New Mexico were new states that had entered the Union only four years earlier. Pedro might not be quite certain of their boundaries. Both had mostly straight lines as boundaries. Arizona was bounded on the west by the Colorado River, and New Mexico, the better bet, was almost entirely straight lines except for one tiny stretch of the Rio Grande.

Both were tried. Nothing. Nevada was mostly straight lines, too, except for a bit of the Colorado in the southeast, so that was tried. Again nothing.

Wingate, feeling his career hung in the balance, was the only one who didn't give up after that. He made up a written dictionary of the various ciphers keyed in to each letter of the alphabet. That was against the rules, but he didn't want to lose out by making a mistake in that respect. He then tried the six states already tested and went on to try all the remaining states as well. Nothing in every case.

That was Wingate's story that hot summer evening in 1943, and when he concluded he said, "I won't say that ended my career, because it obviously didn't, but it certainly slowed my advance. Someone had to be blamed and I was the obvious candidate. It took me several years to live down that blot on what proved to be an otherwise distinguished career. I *did* live it down and I am doing well, so I can't really complain. Still, I wish I knew what went wrong. Could Pedro have made a mistake in the ciphering? He never had at any other time. Could the message have been intercepted and a false message substituted? Somehow I don't see Villa possessing that subtle a sense of humor. His methods might have been effective, but they were always crude.

"But what went wrong, then? I tried every state. In fact, I felt that for the final climactic message he would choose a very unusual key,

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just to make sure it wouldn't be broken if intercepted. Once that occurred to me in later years, I even tried some U.S. territories—Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Samoa, Guam, the Canal Zone. Nothing worked. I expect that until I die I'll wake up at night still worrying about it."

I had listened to the story attentively. I was only an apprentice in my mid-twenties and Wingate was one of the great men in the field. When he finished, I said diffidently, "Do you still have the message? And the list of substitutions for each letter?"

"Oh, yes," said Wingate bitterly. "I've kept it on hand as a grim reminder of the fact that disasters wait around every corner. And every once in a while I gaze at it in the hope that illumination will suddenly blaze up within me. —It never has."

"In that case," I said even more diffidently, "I might be able to read it for you."

"What!" he said. "Are you mad?"

"I hope not, sir," I said.

"Are you trying to tell me that I've been worrying over this for over a quarter of a century and you've got the answer after hearing the story once?"

"It's possible, sir. Let me tell you something about Pedro that you haven't told me, and if I'm right I'll tell you what I think is the key to the message."

"You do that, son," he said, "and I shall take the greatest interest possible in your future advancement."

Well, it worked out, of course. The message was a straightforward description of where Villa was and how to trap him, and he *would* have been trapped in a week but for a natural and unfortunate failure of communication between Wingate and Pedro. The correct translation of the message is now buried in some government pigeonhole and I doubt that it will ever be released for public consumption, but at least it meant that Wingate had his private misery lifted from his heart.

Wingate *did* take an interest in my advance and I moved rapidly up the ranks until my unfortunate habit of being right when my superiors were wrong, and reminding them of the fact whenever I thought it would do them good, made it more comfortable for them to see to it that I underwent early retirement.

Griswold returned to his whiskey and soda and I said, "Hold on!

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You did say that this man Wingate tried all forty-eight states, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"He didn't inadvertently leave out one?"

"No, he didn't."

"Or make a mistake in the deciphering?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well, then, how could you work out an answer? It's impossible."

Jennings and Baranov made indignant sounds of agreement with me.

Griswold said, "Impossible only to inferior minds. I told you the story exactly as Wingate told it to me and Wingate said nothing of Pedro's origin except that he was from 'across the border.' Combine that with the fact that he could speak perfect Mexican Spanish and it might seem that he was originally from Mexico. You three probably took it for granted he was.

"However, his real name was Mackenzie Clifford, as Wingate told me and as I told you, and that is not a name that sounds Mexican. There is another border, after all, and William Lyon Mackenzie was the nearest thing to a George Washington that Canada had. Anyone with a first name of Mackenzie is very likely to be Canadian."

"Oh!" I said, feeling enlightenment begin to creep in on me.

"Yes, oh!" said Griswold. "Americans think of American states and then their minds close. Canadians think of American states, yes, but of Canadian provinces as well, and they can't help giving the latter at least equal prominence. Wingate had speculated that Pedro, or Mackenzie Clifford, wanted something unusual as his key for this particular message and I imagine he did—so he automatically thought of a province.

"There were nine Canadian provinces in 1916, Newfoundland not being included at the time. Since I, too, have maps in my mind as our friend here has, I could see the answer at once. Of the nine provinces, six border on the Atlantic Ocean or Hudson Bay and one on the Pacific Ocean. That leaves two provinces without a waterfront: Alberta and Saskatchewan. Of these two, Alberta's southwestern border follows the irregular line of a ridge of the Rocky Mountains. Saskatchewan is therefore the only Canadian province whose boundaries are all straight lines.

"Saskatchewan was farther north than any American state at the time. When Pedro said the key was the northernmost with all straight boundaries, he very naturally was thinking of Saskatche-

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wan, and Wingate and his colleagues just as naturally thought of Wyoming.

"To begin with, I guessed that Pedro was born in Saskatchewan and that local pride was showing. I said as much to Wingate, and, with great surprise, he confirmed it. I knew I was right then, and went ahead in full confidence."

And with what I imagine he felt to be a modest smirk, Griswold took another sip at his drink.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies what's left of Joe Moncrief,
A famed but now defunct jewel thief,
Who died because of once forgetting
His iron-clad rule on jewels and setting,
Which simply was: when stealing gems,
Whether in rings or diadems,
Pry out the jewels, then cast aside
The settings by which they're identified.
For years, this concept kept Joe sweet
And kept him, too, on Easy Street,
Until the night at a Turkish revue
He spotted a ruby of gorgeous hue
(To a jewel thief's dream the ultimate answer)
Set in the navel of a belly-dancer,
Herself so lovely of mien and shape
That Joe watched ruby and girl agape,
And then attempted, romantic fool,
To steal the setting as well as the jewel—
Whereat her boy friend drew his scimitar
And punctured Joe Moncrief's perimeter.

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a *NEW* Inspector Dover story by

JOYCE PORTER

Dover glanced out of the window as the car turned into the driveway and approached a large, rambling house standing in its own grounds. He perked up a bit. Not exactly Buckingham Palace, but not bad. Not bad at all. There should be good pickings here . . .

A SOUVENIR FOR DOVER

by JOYCE PORTER

"Ongar."

The two other men in the police car realized that Detective Chief Inspector Dover had woken up and was taking notice.

"Ongar," he said again, savoring the word.

The police driver stared woodenly ahead but Dover's assistant, the young and dashing Detective Sergeant MacGregor, couldn't avoid the burdens of social intercourse so easily.

"Sir?"

Dover bestirred himself and his fourteen and a half stone of unlovely fat oozed even farther across the back seat of the car. " 'Buy Ongar, it's longer and stronger,' " he quoted.

Sergeant MacGregor, already squeezed as far as he could go into his corner, noted this unwonted display of animation with alarm. It was a swelteringly-hot day but Dover refused to have a window open on the grounds that fresh air went straight to his stomach. The atmosphere in the police car had to be breathed to be believed, and the last thing anybody wanted was Dover getting excited and making things worse.

"Indeed, sir."

"It's the best damned lavatory paper there is!" snapped Dover,

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who didn't care for subordinates arguing with him. "We've used it for years."

"Really, sir?"

"I've tried to get 'em to buy it at the Yard. Like I told 'em—it's educational, really."

Recalling the considerable portion of the working day that Chief Inspector Dover already spent closeted in the gentlemen's toilet, MacGregor was not surprised that the Scotland Yard authorities were reluctant to make their facilities even more attractive. Though how anybody could find the motley collection of humorous anecdotes, household hints, medical advice, conundrums, advertisements, and inspirational Thoughts for the Day which were printed on every sheet of Ongar toilet paper in any way educational was beyond MacGregor's somewhat limited imagination.

"It's the ink that does it," observed Dover.

"Does what, sir?"

"Doesn't come off, you fool! It was old Mrs. Ongar herself who invented it."

"I didn't know that, sir."

"You would have if you read Ongar's toilet rolls, laddie. 'Strewth, she must have made a bloody fortune." Dover devoted a few moments' silence to pea-green envy before his enthusiasm reasserted itself. "Did you see the one with the cartoons? Bloody funny, that was. Oh, well"—he sighed deeply "—it's the end of an era, I suppose."

"What is, sir?"

"Old Mrs. Ongar getting wiped out."

MacGregor clenched his teeth. Dear God, you would have thought the stupid bastard . . : "It's not Mrs. Ongar who's been murdered, sir. It's her great-nephew. A young man called Michael Montgomery."

Dover's interest waned. He eased his greasy bowler hat back on his head and cautiously undid the top button of his overcoat. " 'Strewth, it's hot in here." He dragged out a handkerchief that few people could have cared to touch without surgical gloves and mopped his brow. "Got a fag, laddie?"

"I think we're just arriving, sir."

Dover glanced out of the window as the car turned into a driveway and approached a large, rambling house standing in its own grounds. He perked up a bit. Not exactly Buckingham Palace, but not bad. Not bad at all. There should be good pickings here.

The local constabulary had been on the scene for some time and were still milling busily around. Most of the available space in front

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of the house was occupied by their vehicles, lights flashing and radios chattering. Alerted by an underling, a uniformed inspector appeared in the doorway, but Dover, incensed at having had to walk all of fifty yards from his car, was in no mood to bandy compliments with power-mad bumpkins.

"Where's the stiff?" he demanded, pausing, as he waddled painfully across the threshold, only long enough to deliver one of his better full-frontal scowls.

It was the uniformed inspector's first experience of the Dover Method of detection but he was a highly disciplined man who fully appreciated the consequences of ramming a superior officer's false teeth down his throat. Prudently unclenching his fists, he led the way to the back of the house.

The scene of the crime was a poky, apparently disused pantry which had been perfunctorily converted into a bedroom. Tight-lipped, the uniformed inspector indicated the salient features. Pride of place was occupied by the late Michael Montgomery, pinned to the mattress of a camp bed by a World War II German army bayonet, the hilt of which was still sticking up out of the middle of his chest. There were no signs of a struggle and only a modest path of brown blood stained the top sheet, through which the blade had passed.

"The murder weapon was the property of the deceased, sir," said the uniformed inspector, "and there are no fingerprints on the handle. It has been wiped clean."

Dover tipped what might have been a pile of vital evidence off the only available chair and sat down with a grunt of relief. "Access?"

"Sir?"

"How did the bloody murderer get in, numbskull?"

"Well, through the door you came in by, sir. There's no other way."

Dover raised a meaty and none-too-clean forefinger. "What about that then, eh?" He pointed at a second door across which the camp bed had been somewhat awkwardly jammed.

"We checked that, sir. It leads into the back yard, but it's not been used for years. It's locked and bolted on this side."

"In any case, you can't open it," said MacGregor, "because the camp bed's in the way."

Dover ignored him. "Windows?"

"Just the one, sir." By now the uniformed inspector was realizing that he'd drawn Scotland Yard's only purblind detective. He carefully picked his way through the obstacle course of discarded clothing, canvas grips, dogeared girlie magazines, and plastic bags from

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the Duty Free Shop which littered the floor, and triumphantly indicated the window. "It's heavily barred, sir. Nobody could gain entry that way."

MacGregor went to look for himself. "Was it open last night?"

"No."

"It was very hot."

"Not hot enough to melt the layers of paint on that window, sergeant. You'd need a chisel to get it open."

Dover's chair creaked impatiently. "Time of death?"

"The doctor reckons in the small hours of this morning, sir. He'll have a better idea when—"

"Instantaneous?"

"Virtually, sir."

"Need any expert knowledge or strength?"

"The doctor thought not, sir. A heavy, fairly sharp blade plunged into the chest of a man lying on his back and most likely asleep—well, you'd have a job not to kill him."

"And no bloody fingerprints," complained Dover. "Just my bloody luck!"

"None that can't be accounted for, sir. No clues at all, really."

"Never are these days," said Dover. "It's all this detective stuff on the telly. Talk about an Open University course in bloody crime!"

The ambulance men came for the body. They got no resistance from Dover. Bloodstained corpses put him right off his food, and he didn't care who knew it.

On the pretext of trying to arrange for a cup of coffee, MacGregor slipped away and managed to achieve a slightly more professional debriefing of the uniformed inspector, though he wondered why he bothered. This case already bore the hallmarks of one of those typical Dover cock-ups in which the last person likely to be inconvenienced was the murderer.

When MacGregor returned, he found Dover still sitting on his chair, halfheartedly leafing through one of the victim's girlie magazines. Instantly abandoning the soft porn, Dover struck straight for the jugular vein of the situation.

"Where's my bloody coffee?"

"Just coming, sir," lied MacGregor. "I thought you might care to see Mrs. Wilkins first."

"Mrs. Who? 'Strewth"—Dover's butterfly flitted off on one of its many tangents "—what a tip!" He swept a lethargic arm round the room. "Catch me spending the night in a crummy dump like this."

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"It is a bit basic, sir," agreed MacGregor, "but that's no reason for this Montgomery chap to have dumped all his belongings on the floor."

"No wardrobe."

"There are some hooks behind the door, sir."

"No dressing-table. No bedside lamp. And it pongs."

MacGregor wondered if the pong had been quite so pronounced before Dover had arrived.

"Suppose you got taken short in the night?" demanded Dover with all the caring concern of one who frequently did. "Have you seen where the blooming light switch is?"

MacGregor, a trained detective, had. It was on the wall next to the locked and bolted door across which the camp bed had been pushed. "I thought it was quite handy, really, sir. Well, when you're in bed, that is. A bit awkward, perhaps, when you come into the room by the other door."

"You could break your bloody neck," insisted Dover indignantly, "groping around for that in the bloody dark. In an emergency. Speaking of which, laddie"—he rose ponderously to his feet "—have you spotted a lavatory in your travels?"

By the time Dover got round to questioning Mrs. Wilkins—he'd found the roll of biblical quotations in the downstairs loo almost totally absorbing—the good lady herself had had ample time to sort out precisely what she intended to tell him. Seated on the camp bed—it was either that or stand—she delivered her statement with a succinctness that left Dover floundering.

Mrs. Wilkins was housekeeper-companion to old Mrs. Ongar and the only living-in servant. The others came in daily but on that particular morning they had, of course, been turned back by the police. How Mrs. Wilkins was supposed to cope with a prostrate Mrs. Ongar, a houseful of guests, and all these blessed repetitions about how she found the body she simply didn't—

Dover clutched at the one straw he could see. Mrs. What's-her-name had found the body, had she?

At seven-thirty that morning. She'd gone in to waken this Montgomery boy—

"With a cup of tea?"

If that was a hint, Mrs. Wilkins ignored it. She'd gone in to waken this Montgomery boy because he was the sort of idle ne'er-do-well who'd spend all day lolling in bed given half the chance. Mrs. Ongar

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liked her guests to be up with the sun. Mind you, Mrs. Ongar didn't have to try rousing people who were as dead as mutton with nasty great knives stuck in their chests. Not that Mrs. Wilkins had lost her head. She had broken the news to Mrs. Ongar and then phoned the police. She hadn't touched anything and neither had anybody else because she'd kept the door locked until the police came, and if that was all she'd be going because she'd only got one pair of hands and they'd all be screaming for their lunch before she'd had time to turn round.

For all Dover cared, she could have dropped down dead, but MacGregor took the fight against crime more seriously. To the accompaniment of baleful looks from both Dover and Mrs. Wilkins, he insisted on asking a few questions.

When Mrs. Wilkins went to waken Mr. Montgomery—

Well?

—was the door closed?

Yes. Mrs. Wilkins had given a perfunctory tap and come straight in, having no intention of standing on ceremony with the likes of him.

Was the light on?

It had better not have been. Mrs. Ongar had a thing about wasting electricity.

So the room was in darkness?

Bright as day. Which was just as well, seeing the state his room was in. Why youngsters like him couldn't hang things up in a civilized manner was beyond her. Mind you, she blamed the parents.

MacGregor frowned. So the curtains were open?

The curtains were closed. They were also paper-thin. Mrs. Wilkins was surprised that MacGregor hadn't spotted that for himself. They let in more light than they kept out. And with the sun blazing down out of a clear blue sky—

MacGregor tried again. "I understand that Mr. Montgomery was only a guest. He didn't live here."

He lived in Australia and it was a pity he hadn't stayed there. Of course he was only a guest—and an uninvited one to boot. That's why he'd been put in the old pantry. It was the best they could do at short notice with the house being full. Waltzed in the day before yesterday, he had, large as life and twice as handsome if you didn't count those shifty eyes and the pimples. Straight from Heathrow without so much as a phonecall first to see if it was convenient. As

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if Mrs. Wilkins hadn't enough on her plate without hordes of foreigners descending without so much as a by-your-leave.

MacGregor had looked up from his notebook some time ago, but Mrs. Wilkins was not one to yield the floor until she was good and ready. "You say the house was full?"

Of course it was full. Still was. Full of Mrs. Ongar's sponging relations, any one of whom would walk barefoot over a bed of nails for a free meal.

But they had been invited.

Mrs. Wilkins tossed MacGregor a final crumb before she brought the interview to a close. Of course they'd been invited. They'd come to celebrate Mrs. Ongar's seventy-fifth birthday yesterday. There'd been a posh dinner party and Mrs. Wilkins still hadn't got straight after it—a situation she proposed to rectify forthwith. Meantime, she would like to remind everybody that it was nearly a quarter past and Mrs. Ongar didn't like to be kept waiting.

"Mrs. Ongar?" echoed MacGregor.

"Across the entrance hall," said Mrs. Wilkins crisply. "Turn left. First on the right. Knock before you go in."

Mrs. Ongar was in bed. Propped up amongst her pillows, she gave an impression of frailty and vulnerability, belied only by a formidable jaw line of which the late Benito Mussolini would not have been ashamed.

Two chairs had been placed in readiness and Dover sank gratefully into the nearest. This hot weather played hell with his feet. When a few moments later Mrs. Wilkins marched in with coffee and biscuits, the chief inspector was almost happy. Munching rhythmically, he stared with some curiosity at the woman who single-handedly had put toilet rolls on the map. Mrs. Ongar handed a sheet of paper to MacGregor. "The name of the murderer is on that list."

MacGregor tried to look grateful.

"It contains the names of the five people who were staying in the house as my guests last night."

"For your birthday party, eh?" asked Dover, wondering if there'd been a cake.

Mrs. Ongar had got Dover's measure as soon as he entered the room. She continued to address herself to MacGregor. "They are the sole surviving members of the family, on my side and on my late husband's. Three of them—Christine Finch, Daniel Ongar, and young Toby Stockdale—would like to think of themselves as poten-

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tial heirs to the Ongar empire. I don't believe in rule by committee and it has always been my aim to leave the entire concern to one person. Since I own ninety-eight percent of the shares, whoever I appoint as my heir will get the lot."

"It sounds more like a motive for your murder than for your great-nephew's," said MacGregor diffidently.

Mrs. Ongar's nostrils flared. "If I might continue without interruption . . . Some years ago I made a will leaving everything to my great-nephew, Michael Montgomery, in Australia. I have had ample time to study my other relations and none of them is fit to run a multi-million-pound business. Daniel Ongar, Toby Stockdale, and Christine's husband, Major Finch, have all been given jobs in the firm and their achievements have been no more than average. If they hadn't been members of the family, I should have dispensed with their services long ago."

Dover shifted unhappily in his chair. Having drunk his coffee and eaten all the biscuits, he was beginning to find time hanging heavy on his hands. His gaze wandered idly about in search of diversion. Mrs. Ongar's bedroom was on the ground floor and had a bathroom en suite. Dover envied her that convenience. Not that it stopped the old biddy keeping an old-fashioned chamber pot under her bed. In fact, Mrs. Ongar seemed to be a real belt-and-braces character. Everything had a back-up system. On the bedside table there was not only an electric bell-push but a large handbell as well, to say nothing of a police whistle dangling on a ribbon from the headboard of the bed. And she'd got two wheelchairs, one manual and one battery-driven.

Mrs. Ongar was still telling MacGregor about her family. "Toby Stockdale is a junior sales representative—in other words, a commercial traveler. David Ongar, my late husband's younger brother, is Chief Personnel Officer, when he can tear himself away from the golf course."

"And Major Finch, madam?"

"He is in charge of security. After an undistinguished career in the Army, he seemed well suited for the position. There is," observed Mrs. Ongar drily, "comparatively little crime in the toilet-paper industry and, as far as industrial espionage is concerned, I myself safeguard the formula for our ink."

Dover was losing interest in the desultory inventory he'd been making of Mrs. Ongar's possessions—an electric torch *and* a candle, wires denoting an electric blanket on the bed *and* a rubber hotwater-

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bottle on one of the chairs, a pair of stout walking-sticks *and* one of those Zimmer frame things. His eye slipped indifferently over a single red rose drooping terminally in a vase. Security officer at Ongar's? That didn't sound a bad job. The sort of thing an experienced ex-copper should be able to do with his eyes closed.

"What's the screw?"

Mrs. Ongar blenched, but she hadn't got where she was by letting trifles like Dover throw her. Quite calmly and dispassionately she studied the crumpled suit, the dandruff epaulettes on that disgusting overcoat, the unspeakable bowler hat, the pale podgy face with the mean little eyes, the motheaten moustache. Then she took a deep breath and put the whole sordid spectacle right out of her mind.

"You must realize," she said, addressing herself exclusively to MacGregor, "that while Christine Finch is actually my niece, her husband—the major—and her daughter have just as good reasons for killing poor Michael. They would both benefit if I were to leave Ongar's to Christine."

"Oh, quite," said MacGregor.

"One of the reasons, you know, that I made poor Michael my heir was that I thought he would be safe, far away in Australia, from the murderous machinations of the rest of the family, safe from their greed and jealousy. You can imagine my feelings"—Mrs. Ongar raised a lightly starched handkerchief momentarily to her eyes "—when the poor boy just walked in. It was a terrible shock. And when I saw the hatred on *their* faces—I blame myself. I should have known they would kill him the moment they had the chance."

MacGregor tried to lower the emotional tension by asking a few routine questions. Predictably, Mrs. Ongar was of little help.

"Last night was my birthday party," she reminded MacGregor. "A happy day, but a tiring one. I didn't get to bed until after eleven and then I slept like a log. All the noise and the excitement and the rich food . . ." She relaxed back deeper into her pillows. "Oh, well, it's not every day that one reaches the age of seventy-five, is it?"

There seemed little point in prolonging the interview. Mrs. Ongar seemed very tired and so, if the sagging jowls and the drooping eyelids were anything to go by, did Dover.

MacGregor smiled sympathetically at Mrs. Ongar. "Well, we'll leave you to get some rest," he murmured.

"Rest?" Mrs. Ongar's head jerked up. "There's no rest for me, young man."

"No?"

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"I have to draw up a new will. I've already sent for my solicitor."

"A new will?"

Mrs. Ongar looked cross. "Haven't you realized that it's *my* life that's in danger. Michael was killed for my money."

"But if you leave your money to one of the others—"

"Precisely! And if I don't make a will, my niece, Christine, will inherit everything. Suppose it was one of the Finch family that murdered Michael? Do you think they would hesitate to kill me in my turn?"

MacGregor tried to suppress the thought that a second murder in the Ongar household might make it a good deal easier to solve the first. "What are you going to do, then?"

"That's my secret!" snapped Mrs. Ongar. "But you can rest assured that I shall take every precaution. In the meantime I want Michael's murderer found without delay. And I also want all the remaining members of my family out of this house as soon as possible. My safety must be your prime concern."

Dover and MacGregor retired to the dining room, which had been set aside for their use. Dover propped his elbows on the highly polished mahogany table and glowered disconsolately at Mrs. Ongar's list of potential murderers. "We're never going to solve this one."

MacGregor tried to take a more positive attitude. "Oh, I expect we'll get to the bottom of it, sir."

Dover pushed the list away and reached for the packet of cigarettes MacGregor had laid out on the table as a sweetener. "Not a single bloody clue for a start," he grumbled as he accepted a light from MacGregor's elegant gold lighter. "This joker creeps downstairs in the middle of the night, stabs What's-his-name with his own bloody bayonet, and creeps back to bed again. No fingerprints, no footprints, no bloodstains, didn't drop anything, and a motive that's shared with half a dozen other people. We're on a hiding to nothing."

MacGregor opened his notebook and laid his pencil ready. "Careful questioning of the suspects, sir—"

"Why don't you grow up, laddie?" demanded Dover. "Careful bloody questioning? Look"—he dropped his voice to a tempting murmur "—why don't we rough 'em up a bit?"

"We can't do that, sir."

"Why not? As long as we're careful not to thump 'em where it shows, it'll be their word against ours. And, if we stick together—"

MacGregor was reluctant to waste time discussing the extent to which Dover's fist could be considered a legitimate instrument of

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justice. "Why don't we just see how far we get playing it by the book first, sir?"

Dover's thirst for violence was a good deal less passionate than his desire for a quiet life. "Oh, suit yourself!" he grunted as a lump of cigarette ash joined the rest of the debris on his waistcoat. "Let's have this security fellow to start with. Major What's-his-name. I rather fancy him."

Major Finch knew the value of reinforcements and arrived accompanied by his lady-wife and his somewhat less than ladylike teenage daughter. "We're all three in exactly the same boat," he explained, "and I thought it would save time."

Dover shrugged his shoulders to indicate that it was no skin off his nose.

The Finches had heard nothing, seen nothing, and knew nothing.

"We were all dog-tired," drawled Mrs. Finch, who tried to distance herself from her lavatory-paper connections by affecting an air of languid sophistication. "That ghastly dinner party! I had a splitting head. I had to take a sleeping pill, so the whole house could have gone up in flames for all I cared."

"Pretty grim," agreed her husband. "And the way Auntie fawned over that disgusting young punk didn't help. Talk about killing the fatted calf!"

"You'd have thought the rest of us simply didn't exist," complained Mrs. Finch. "I'd like to know what she'd have said if we'd turned up without a birthday present. That damned paisley shawl cost over fifty quid and for all the thanks we got you'd think we'd bought it in a sale at Woolworth's."

Samantha-Ivette, the teenage daughter with four earrings in one ear and pink hair, found contradicting her elders more natural than breathing and twice as much fun. "Mick didn't know it was her birthday."

"Then it was an amazing coincidence, darling, that he arrived all the way from Australia just in time for it."

"And he got her that red rose."

"A single red rose!" snorted Major Finch. "Very romantic! Especially when he'd had the damned cheek to touch me for a fiver to buy the old girl something, and then comes back with that damned bayonet for himself. Well, much good it did him!"

MacGregor tried to muscle in. "Who knew about the bayonet?"

"Everybody knew about the bayonet," said Major Finch impa-

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tiently. "He was fooling about with it all through dinner, the damned idiot. I suppose we ought to be grateful he didn't buy himself a submachine gun and a couple of live hand-grenades while he was about it."

"He didn't buy the bayonet," Samantha-Ivette chipped in proudly. "He nicked it. From that shop by the post office. I helped him. I had to keep the old man talking while Mick pinched the bayonet. It was terrific fun."

"Samantha-Ivette!" wailed Mrs.Finch.

"He pinched the red rose, too. From the cemetery."

"My God!" exploded Major Finch. "Well, I just hope all this has taught Auntie Beryl a lesson."

"You mean you hope she'll leave Ongar's to Mummy now, don't you?" inquired Samantha-Ivette pertly. "Why should she? I think she liked Mick, really."

"She was appalled by him! And with good reason."

"Well, at least he wasn't a fuddy-duddy old stick-in-the-mud."

"He was a vicious young lout!"

"You think everybody who smokes a bit of pot is a moral degenerate."

"Smokes pot?" Mrs. Finch clutched her heart. "I didn't know he smoked pot. Why didn't somebody say? Auntie would have thrown him out of the house."

"Oh, Mummy, don't be so prehistoric!"

Dover got enough of this sort of thing at home without having to put up with it at work as well. He fixed Major Finch with a beady eye. "Hear you're a security officer," he grunted. "Thought that was a job for an ex-copper."

Major Finch took a second or two to catch up, but eventually he agreed that many security officers were indeed former policemen. "Not that background is all that important, you know. Any conscientious, reasonably intelligent man with good organizing ability can cope."

Dover was less interested in the qualifications than the rewards. "How much do you get paid?"

Major Finch was shocked. "I'm afraid my salary is a confidential matter," he said coldly. "Strictly between myself and Ongar's."

And five minutes of intensive browbeating failed to make the major unseal his lips, in spite of Dover's repeated warnings that such an uncooperative attitude did a murder suspect little good. In the end it was Dover who got fed up first and the Finch family, more

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than a little confused about what was going on, were allowed to take their leave.

Daniel Ongar, when he was shown into the dining room, got a smoother ride as Dover harbored no pipe dreams about becoming a personnel officer. However, his suggestion that the murderer had been some passing maniac tramp was received without enthusiasm.

"But why should any of us want to kill the little blackguard?" he asked, adjusting his cuffs and running a hand over his thinning hair.

Dover told him.

Daniel Ongar waved the explanation aside. "Nobody knows which one of us will get Ongar's now," he pointed out. "Beryl's quite potty on the subject or she'd never have made that nasty Montgomery boy her sole heir in the first place. Dear God, she'd never even seen him. Now, I don't pretend to be any more moral than the next chap, but you don't really see me committing murder, do you, just to see the whole kit and caboodle go to Toby Stockdale or one of Dickie Bird's lot?"

Dickie Bird?

"Richard Finch. That's what they used to call him in the Army. And what about *him* as a prime suspect? He was in the infantry and if you want somebody who knows how to use a bayonet—"

"Have you no idea who the next heir will be, sir?"

Daniel Ongar stared imperturbably at MacGregor. "None, except that it's unlikely to be me. I'm sixty and, in dear Beryl's book, that's geriatric. She talks about keeping it in the family but it could be the cats' home or the Chancellor of the Exchequeur or something equally daft. I mean, where was the logic in leaving it all to young Montgomery, apart from the fact that he was tucked away safe on the other side of the world and unlikely to come bothering her? Poor Beryl, she thinks everybody's after her money. I'll bet she's told you one of us is going to murder her next."

"Don't you think she's every reason to be anxious, sir?"

"No, I damned well don't! Can't you see that Beryl is more valuable to us alive than dead? Dickie Bird, Toby, and I have got pretty well paid jobs. Mrs. Wilkins, too, if it comes to that. What guarantee have we got that Beryl's successor, whoever it is, won't give the whole bang shoot of us the sack?"

"Speaking of well paid jobs," said Dover, "how much will your chief security officer be getting?"

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Daniel Ongar frowned. "Dickie Finch? A damned sight more than we'd pay an outsider, that's for sure. About twenty thousand, I should think."

" 'Strewth!" said Dover.

While MacGregor went off to fetch the last suspect for questioning, Dover busied himself with some simple arithmetic on the margins of the girlie magazine he had absent-mindedly removed from the scene of the crime. After much head-scratching and a heavy precipitation of dandruff he achieved a result which took his breath away. With his pension, even allowing for early retirement, and twenty thousand plus perks—well, there was bound to be a bit of a fiddle somewhere—he'd be bloody rolling in it!

Even when Toby Stockdale, an uninspiring young man in his middle twenties, was sitting opposite him across the dining-room table, Dover seemed unable to drag his popping eyes away from the girlie magazine, an apparent preoccupation which did little to enhance his public image.

Toby Stockdale claimed to have slept the sweet sleep of the deeply inebriated. "Still feeling a mite fragile," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "Took me by surprise, really, the old girl pushing the boat out like that. Usually it's one small dry sherry and a glass of grocer's plonk."

MacGregor looked up from his notebook. "Did Michael Montgomery drink a lot?"

"Swilling it down like there was no tomorrow. Well, you know what Australians are like when it comes to booze. Paralytic. Funny, really."

"What is?"

"Auntie Beryl letting her hair down like that. I mean, when he first turned up, right out of the blue, I thought she looked pretty sick. Cheered me up because I reckoned she'd have second thoughts about leaving Ongar's to a yobbo like him. Talk about your wild colonial boy! And when he came in at tea-time with that stupid bayonet thing, I thought he'd really cooked his goose. Well, it was a bit much. Pretending to stab people with it and everything. Childish. Still, that single red rose must have done the trick because she was all over him at the birthday dinner. Egging him on, laughing, joking, dancing with everybody."

"Dancing?"

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"Hopping around like a two-year-old. We had the radio on. Bit obscene, I thought, at her age. Not that I said anything, of course."

A loud rumble from Dover's stomach warned everybody that it was lunchtime, and Toby Stockdale, although somewhat bemused, didn't wait to be told twice that he could go.

Dover, usually such a rapacious trencherman, didn't however move.

MacGregor eyed him anxiously. Was the old fool sickening for something? If so, dear Lord, please let it be lingering, painful, and fatal.

Dover sighed and, folding up his girlie magazine, stuffed it into his pocket. "We could pin it on one of 'em, I suppose," he said without much enthusiasm. "Fiddle the evidence a bit. Just for the look of things."

MacGregor's heart sank.

"Wouldn't stand up in court, of course. Still, I wouldn't mind putting that Major What's-his-name out of circulation for a bit."

"Major Finch, sir?"

"On remand six months at least before the case came to trial," mused Dover, demonstrating that even his sluggish brain cells could be galvanized into life with the right motivation. "And no bail on a murder charge. You couldn't expect Ongar's to do without a chief security officer all that time, could you?"

MacGregor flattered himself that he could see the light at the end of this particular murky tunnel. "You're not thinking of applying for the job yourself, are you, sir?"

Dover grinned with nauseating complacency. "Mrs. Ongar took quite a fancy to me."

MacGregor resisted the temptation to debate the point. "She might like you a great deal more, sir, if you found out who really murdered her great-nephew."

"Use your head, laddie! All that old biddy wants is the whole thing to just fade away."

"Surely not, sir?"

"She hardly knew the joker," insisted Dover. "And, I ask you, who cares about some blooming foreigner getting knocked off?" He dropped his cigarette in the general direction of the ashtray and hauled himself up. "Think I'll go and have a word with her. See how she'd like to play it."

"You mean whether she'd sooner have Major Finch framed for the crime or just let the whole investigation fizzle out?"

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Cheap sarcasm was wasted on Dover. "You wait here, laddie. I shan't be a tick."

In the event, Dover was away for ten minutes—a period of time which left MacGregor perplexed. It was too long for Mrs. Ongar just to have sent Dover off with a flea in his ear but too short, surely, for any meaningful discussion to have taken place.

Luncheon was taken, on the recommendation of the uniformed inspector who finally got a bit of his own back, in a low-class pub full of hot and sweaty customers swilling pints of beer and carefully avoiding the bar snacks. Dover, having opted for the shepherd's pie with a double helping of chips and half a bottle of tomato sauce, gobbled his way to apoplexy in as much silence as his distressing table manners would allow. Steamed ginger pudding and custard followed. Dover thought about cheese and biscuits but decided it was just too hot and went for a large brandy instead, just to settle his stomach. In the meantime, a quick trip to the Gents wouldn't come amiss.

Dover stood up and made the supreme sacrifice to a temperature now soaring up into the nineties. He dragged his overcoat off and dropped it, with an audible clunk, on his chair.

MacGregor watched Dover waddle clumsily out of the bar. Although the sergeant's mind was mostly occupied with the probable cost of a double brandy, his keen ears had caught that clunk—and it set the alarm bells ringing.

The Ongar house had contained many valuable knickknacks and trinkets which would fit quite nicely into the overcoat pocket of any light-fingered detective chief inspector who happened to be passing. MacGregor lived in dread not of Dover actually nicking something—he'd got used to that long ago—but of Dover being caught red-handed actually nicking something. The situation called for drastic action, and MacGregor was not found wanting. Hesitating only for a second, he plunged his bare hand into the pocket of Dover's overcoat and found, together with several other articles too disgusting to bear closer examination, an electric torch.

MacGregor put the torch on the table in front of him. Why in God's name had Dover purloined an electric torch? It was neither valuable nor especially attractive. Of course, Dover's standards, even of dishonesty, were not high but—

Fifteen minutes of considerable discomfort spent in the pub's outside convenience had done nothing to sweeten Dover's mood. For

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one thing, there had been no Ongar's toilet paper with which to while away the time.

"Just lousy little squares of newspaper threaded on a string," he complained, and would no doubt have developed the theme further if he hadn't spotted the electric torch on the table. "What the hell . . .?"

"Sir—"

"I didn't steal it," said Dover quickly. "Old Mrs. What's -her-name gave it me."

"Mrs. Ongar gave it you, sir?"

Dover scowled. "As a souvenir."

"And she'll confirm that, sir, will she? If asked."

"Don't be so bloody wet, laddie! She'll deny she's ever set eyes on it." Dover dropped his overcoat onto the floor and sat down. "Where's my bloody brandy?"

MacGregor's brain was in turmoil. It was humiliating enough when Dover failed to solve a crime, but it was a thousand times worse when, by a pure fluke of course, the disgusting old fool spotted the solution first. MacGregor nodded at the torch. "That's a vital clue, isn't it, sir?"

"You want your brains examining!"

"It's the only electric torch in that house, isn't it, sir?"

Dover's bottom lip stuck out. "How do I know? I haven't looked and neither have you. Could be hundreds of 'em. I just suggested to Mrs. Ongar that she'd be better off without this one."

"My God," breathed MacGregor, "the murderer must have had a torch! He couldn't have put the main light on if he'd wanted to because the switch was right on the other side of the room beyond the camp bed. And with all Montgomery's possessions strewn over the floor . . . And then he had to locate the bayonet . . . He had to have a torch. And there was no moon last night, either."

"You're so sharp it's a wonder you don't cut yourself," muttered Dover.

"But, sir—"

"Go and get my brandy and stop sticking your nose into what's none of your business! And give us a fag while you're at it."

MacGregor got his cigarette case out. "But this *is* my business, sir! And yours. We're supposed to be investigating a murder."

"Ah," said Dover, delighted to have his entire argument handed to him on a plate, "investigating's the word, laddie! I'm with you there. It's solving the bloody thing that's going to drop us right in

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it. Look at it this way—there's millions of unsolved crimes every year. This is just another one."

MacGregor could be very uncooperative. "Sir, it's our duty—"

"We'd be crucified in court!" Dover was twitching with exasperation. "Accusing somebody as rich and famous as Mrs. Ongar—a frail, bedridden old duck of seventy-five—of killing her teenage heir from Australia the day after she'd met him for the first time. Bloody hell"—he shuddered dramatically "—it doesn't bear thinking about!"

"But she isn't frail and bedridden, is she, sir?"

"Of course she is!" Dover's voice rose to a near scream. "You saw her!"

"That was mostly for our benefit, sir." MacGregor had ceased grasping at straws and was now beginning to make good, durable bricks. "She wasn't bedridden on the night of her birthday party. She was even dancing. Stockdale said so. She sounds perfectly capable of getting up in the middle of the night and walking as far as Montgomery's room. She wouldn't even have to go upstairs afterward."

Dover scowled. "She's still an old lady."

"A babe in arms could have stuck that bayonet in Montgomery, sir, especially if he was drunk. And who was it who'd—most untypically—been plying him with drink all evening?"

"You want your head examining!"

But MacGregor wasn't going to be put off by vulgar abuse. "Mrs. Ongar had Montgomery put in that downstairs room, sir, well away from everybody else. She ensured he'd be sleeping soundly, and she had a torch. She also knew how awkwardly placed the main light switch was."

"Anybody could have known that!" squealed Dover. "And had a torch. And what about motive? Montgomery was her blue-eyed boy. She was going to leave him all her money."

"We don't have to prove motive, sir."

"Sometimes it bloody well helps!" snapped Dover. " 'Strewth, she'd barely clapped eyes on the little bastard. You going to claim she suddenly ran amuck or something?"

"Didn't she give you a hint?"

Dover squinted suspiciously at MacGregor. "Who?"

"Mrs. Ongar, sir."

"When?"

"When you went to see her, sir, just before we left the house. When you—er—acquired the torch, sir."

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Dover had had time to work out his answer. "We didn't discuss the matter," he said firmly.

"You must have talked about something, sir."

Dover shrugged his meaty shoulders. "I was asking her about getting a job at Ongar's, if I took early retirement. You know, something in the security line." He grinned to himself. "She was very helpful. Thought she might be able to shift that major joker to another department. Said it'd be simpler than trying to pin the murder on him. Give her her due," said Dover generously, "she's got a good head on her shoulders, that woman."

"You don't think she was perhaps trying to bribe you, sir?"

Less convincing displays of indignation have won Oscars, and Dover brought his performance to a sizzling conclusion by advising his sergeant to go and boil his head and reminding him that there was still a double brandy outstanding.

MacGregor reached reluctantly for his wallet. "If it had been Montgomery who'd killed Mrs. Ongar, I could have understood it. That would have been normal."

"I used to think I had an ulcer," said Dover, "the pain was so bad."

But MacGregor's thoughts were soaring far above Dover's stomach. "I wonder if that's what Mrs. Ongar thought—that Montgomery was going to kill her? She was terrified of being murdered for her money—Daniel Ongar or somebody said that. With Montgomery in Australia, she felt safe. But, when he turned up here—"

"The doctor's quite definite, though. It's just the wind."

"He was a right young tearaway by all accounts," MacGregor went on, "and when Mrs. Ongar found she had him under the same roof with her, she must have panicked. And when he started fooling around with that army bayonet, it must have confirmed all her fears. He intended killing her."

"Chronic gastritis," said Dover. "There's only one treatment. Lots of rest."

"Sir"—MacGregor was so pleased with himself that he burst straight through Dover's favorite daydream, in which the chief inspector was à semi-invalid for life—"I've got the motive! It was a preemptive strike. Mrs. Ongar killed her great-nephew because she thought he was planning to kill her."

Dover was getting very bored with all this Ongar business. "You'd be laughed out of court," he grunted. "Not that you'd ever get it into court. Like I said, no bloody evidence."

"There's that torch, sir."

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Quite slowly and deliberately, Dover picked the torch up off the table and put it back in his pocket. "What torch, laddie?"

MacGregor nodded slightly to acknowledge defeat. The torch didn't really make a ha'porth of difference. Dover was right. They'd never be able to make a case out against Mrs. Ongar. "I'll get your brandy, sir."

MacGregor stood up and walked over to the bar. He arrived just in time to see mine host drape the last towel over the beer pumps.

"We're closed, mate. I called last orders ten minutes ago."

MacGregor appealed to the landlord's sense of decency, fair play, and compassion.

"We've all got sick friends, mate, and if I was you I'd get mine out into the fresh air before I give the pair of you something to take to casualty-with you."

MacGregor swore under his breath. Damn Michael Montgomery and damn old Mrs. Ongar. If he hadn't been so preoccupied with their blooming troubles, he wouldn't be faced with the problem of telling Dover that he couldn't take his medicine for at least two and a half hours.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PARENTAL GUIDANCE

by JOHN LARGE

She was only a criminal's daughter,
Who gave daddy no reason to boast,
Till she focused on what he had taught her
And was listed as one wanted most.

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CLASSIFIED MARKET

ELLERY QUEEN — published 13 times a year. CLASSIFIED AD rate is $2.95 per word — payable in advance — ($59.00 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be

ART

MOVIE POSTERS: Vintage and "Current". Hitchcock, Sci-Fi, Mysteries: 1,000's available: ORDER IMMEDIATELY. (808) 980-1130. Catalog $2.00. Artistic Dimensions, 12115 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood, CA 91607.

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SEND 25¢ for Large Listing of Mystery and Detective Books. Canford, Drawer 216E, Freeville, N.Y. 13068.

READ "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Instructive booklet tells how to write an effective classified ad. Also includes certificates worth $2.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy send $2.25 (includes postage) to I. M. Bozoki, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

LUIS Mendoza, Vic Varallo, Jesse Falkenstein, Delia Riordan, Ivor Maddox reader? Subscribe to quarterly newsletter about Elizabeth Linington, Lesley Egan, Dell Shannon, Anne Blaisdell, Egan O'Neill for $12 per year. $15 foreign. Rinehart Potts, 1223 Glen Terrace, Glassboro, New Jersey 08028. Few sets of 1984 volume left.

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THERE IS NO CHARGE FOR THE ZIP CODE: please use it when ordering merchandise from classified advertisements. You'll receive faster delivery.

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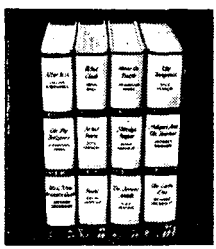

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DETECTIVERSE

TAKING LESSONS

by MARK GRENIER

Said a shoplifting lady named Nast,
Whose proficiency truly was vast,
"Pay attention, my son,
To the way that it's done
And I know that you'll pick things up fast."

© *1985 by Mark Grenier.*

"Q"

UNDERMINED

by GEORGE W. TUDOR

I knew a detective named Slade,
Who confronted a murderous maid—
She confessed to the crime
But her charms were sublime
And that night in her bedroom he stayed.

But the morning sun found him alone—
He awoke with a start and a moan
For his suspect had fled,
Leaving him in her bed—
With his wallet and car she had flown.

She was caught and was quickly confined.
Against Slade's credit card she had signed.
And he smiled when he said,
"I had fun in your bed
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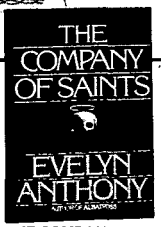

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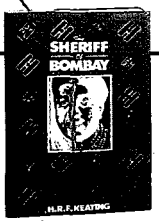

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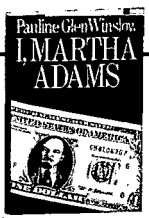

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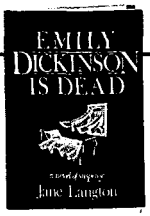

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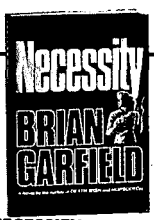

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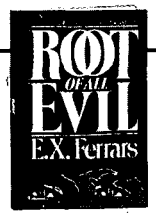

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